

Dan Souder

# Sweet Bread

and other Stories,  
Essays, and Tracts



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Cover

Hubert Robert, *Girls dancing around an  
obelisk*, 1798

for Ingrid and Thomas

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## The First Man to Leave the Solar System

Professor Saul Birmingham here, speaking anomalously from the Oort Cloud planetesimals. I gave myself a religious first name as a joke. I've been here 40 minutes, having arrived after 40 years and ten complete educations along the way. To master the sum of all knowledge took a picosecond. I am partly android and I know how to upgrade.

The trip was quick because my spacecraft runs on anti-matter. The method takes proxima anti-matter and shoots it at deuterium. The annihilating particles release more energy in that instant than the chronosphere on Cygnus XY. So the entire journey's requirement is only 2 grams of anti-matter. In fact I arrived in the Oort Cloud with such force that my craft scattered twelve outer objects. That will come out of my check.

Everything is ready. Tri-point gravitational anchoring is set. My position is published. I have linked the two-handed controller and

calibrated the viewscreen. I am ready to start the game.

First I would like to say hello to the ammonia astronomers receiving this transmission. What is up, you smelly ligands? I know you were against this trip. But if I wasn't expressly born for this game, I earned the android modifications that make its playing possible. Remember that evolution may be the starter, but I am the closer. (This melded being is I. We other, we are close and closing.)

And start. My object is to approach each planetesimal, scan it for rare elements (ruthenium, rhodium, duckbutter), mark the finding with a beacon, and move on to the next before my craft is obliterated by unforeseen debris. I can theoretically track the cloud, but there's a margin of error. Hence my feeling vulnerable.

For each element I locate, a tenth of what is mined is mine. One mining craft alone will make me a trillionaire. I'll be able to buy my own extra-solar planet, one with water and flora and everything. Imagine swimming in a pristine lake, at night on my back, and making up my own constellations. Imagine taking my time around the coast, mapping the landmass without calculus. Every rock I see will be mine. Any dead Mormons will have to relocate.





## Sweet Bread

The Carthaginians continued to bake their cookies and cakes between sunrise and sunset all throughout the Punic Wars. A taste for treats does not diminish during fighting; indeed, it boosts morale to eat sweet breads upon falling back from battle. BC bakers prepared not foods but time itself, for with their loaves at each new dawn they ensured the soldier would get into formation, rather than acting hurt, running off, or other dishonest practices. Bread cheated the orders of the soldier's own mind, his fear and apathy.

Today owing to their intensive flavors and world surplus of butter bricks and sugar buckets, sweet breads have come to life, as it were, as extended phenotypes of human desire. The demand for sourdough and marble rye is but a thumbnail speck of that of sweets. For and always the flour volume shall be greater than that of sugar-butter, but in the modern age the three are evolutionarily linked as each generation produces new people more adapted to sweets than the one before. Thus it points to

a happy future where desire is always comforted.

In the densities of city life, someone need ride her mobility scooter fewer than 50 feet to enter a store selling sweet breads. This saving of electricity will postpone our environmental collapse. Furthermore, spotting her favorite bread on coupon websites will alter her discretionary income. Being open to different kinds is better still, whether leavened, mixed, or fried, with more savings meaning even more comfort.

Sweet breads aren't only for the solitary. Although the initial expenditure is big, a geek of sorts could do nothing better than to learn to bake sweet breads himself. A savoury party does much to bond a stranger to another, like negatively charged work slacks to one's legs in winter. The likely result of an evening board game and five types of sweet bread is cramp-inducing sex. Thus life from flour shall arise. Add recipes for yeast and fermentation to the party and every guest will come twice.



## Frau Neher to Her Love

My love, it has been five years since the man who brought us here denounced us. It has been four since you were executed. You were the second husband I have lost. Would it bother you to know I miss you both the same?

I have held on, my love, and half my ten-year sentence in this gulag is up. Ten years, and I am innocent, and so were you. We are Germans. Yes, we chose to move to the Soviet Union. It was our chance. We could start a theater there, and begin our life anew, away from the false Socialists in charge of our country, in a place where the people are in charge. It was to be a wondrous thing.

Our little theater did well, didn't it? You wrote plays and I acted them. The people loved us. I hadn't felt such affection from an audience since those plays I did with Brecht, before he went mad. I don't mean to but sometimes I wonder if he knows they put me in a camp. His beloved Soviets.

The trouble was with Wangenheim. He made it possible for us to emigrate, to get away from

the brown shirts infecting the Fatherland. I hate to remember how you hesitated. The last night in Berlin you hid your face in my wide nightgown sleeve. How poor I was to ignore you. My mind was full of *The Threepenny Opera*, of Polly. I thought I had become her. I was ready to go, not to join but to lead those Russians. My arguments against you, my love, my God, how false they were. The words I spoke were Brecht's, I had memorized them for the stage. They had taken such root inside me that I was deceived. I thought they were my own. You agreed we'd go. "For the task assigned them / Men aren't smart enough or sly" I said to myself.

Wangenheim welcomed us. We thanked him and began to build. How warm the audiences were. When I looked into the crowd I always looked at you, my love. But the gratitude Wangenheim expected of me was more than I would give. I should have seen what he would do. But you were happy there and I was happy with you. So we took ourselves to the dinners and the *fêtes*. How the comrades waited there to meet us. How I could I know which man was in favor and which was not? How could I have been rude to refuse someone's slattern wife? We were all the proletariat. We had a common cause. All the changing intrigue bewildered in a foreign tongue. But I had my sense, my love, and it told me in High German what man that Wangen was.

He said we followed Trotsky. It went up to the Great Architect of Communism and the order came back down. They shot you in the courtyard for everyone to see. And I was sent away to

starve, and freeze, and toil. I became an old woman. I acquired a limp and cannot make a fist. Perhaps there was some hand we should not have shaken, or some speech we should not have heard. I should have hurt you with Wangenheim.

It came to us here as rumours that our country had turned against the Great Architect. There are other Germans in the gulag. One told me the Army of the Fatherland is here. How good it felt to line up outside when we heard them, without the kapo's call. It lifted my heart for my ears to receive our language spoken by men, my love. I had forgotten who directed them. I thought that they would free their fellow Germans. But when the *Gruppenführer* asked my name I said Carola Neher, and they pulled me out of line, and I remembered whom we'd fled from.

The part of me that hoped they'd seen me on stage, that they'd know me and forgive me, was a weak voice and I scoffed at how it was still inside me. Yes, they knew that I was Polly. They called me a capitalist, so they knew the film of the *Opera*, with its different ending from the play. To their questions I told them I was a good Socialist, that I loved the Fatherland and despised the *bourgeoisie*. They said that they were cheered to hear it.

The order came down. I was released from this gulag but was sent to one of theirs. How strange it is this moment my foresight chooses to be clear. It's one in which I cannot act. My sentence is indeterminate. My life, my love, is not. With this news I can see its

end.

When it's calm in the cold night, and I huddle  
against the woman beside me, the lice leap  
between the borders of our hair.



## A Philosopher of Motion

July 4th, date indeterminate. Lindy was one of several hundred philosophers of motion not broadcasting on the internet. Any natural measurement she performed with tools preceding the Era of the Silicon. She used protractors, slide rules, and guesstimates she was fervently certain of. A philosopher of motion is, in this latter way at least, like us just the same. Because she loathed all electric gadgets, Lindy's house skewed the average utilities bill for her neighborhood. New people who moved in expecting the lowest heating and air conditioning bills in the county were in for a shock, mm-haw-haw. Therefore fewer people spoke to her than had in the past, once word about her got around, although it must be admitted there were few conversers to begin with, once they realized she was unable to take a picture any time she wanted, as befits a philosopher of motion.

During times of possibility, Lindy pulled on her long canvas skirt, tucked in her button-down, forced her flat feet into diner-waitress sneakers, and went a-gambolling. It wasn't

often she felt that she could leave her unelectric home, so when her brain gave her the chance she took it, and transformed herself from a philosopher of motion into a motive sort. The only place along a safe bus line that would have her was a retirement home. She was an entertainer in the afternoon. While the banjolele player slagged her off by running scales impatiently, Lindy tried to impress her thoughts upon the aged. Each must understand the *a priori* why's of motion, from the whistle in Bertis's exhale to the I.V. dripping into Ivy's gnarled arm.

On this particular Independence Day, Lindy's lecture was interrupted by a resident philosopher. A musty old thing, she refused to sit but stood among the chairs hunched over a walker. "I cannot help but move," the resident said. Lindy explained that was due to the universal forces acting on her. "I won't be moving soon enough," the resident insisted. Lindy explained that in fact she would, in decomposition. Stimulation is generated from the outside as well as from within; therefore organic forms being subject to organic processes - Lindy was asked to leave. "It was as though I had an aeroplane, which I never would," she told her seatmate on the ride home, "and I was writing in exhaust short comments on the sky, but their glaucous eyes saw the new letters as if five minutes in the future, blurred and scattered by the wind." Her seatmate, a woman in a big wool coat holding onto a big leather purse, said, "Mm-hm."



This failure overturned the lines by which Lindy governed her existence. No mean feat, as a line from worm's eye view is identical to the view of it from above. A viewpoint of sameness all around could not mend that which is never seen but only demonstrated, the ego. Night had fallen and if there existed disturbance within her then, it was worsened when the fireworks began. Yet despite herself she tip-toed to the window and let the bright magnesium flare upon her retinae. Each time one went off she could see the children playing in the next-door yard, the adults with bottles glinting in the glare. The explosions impressed the others, why should they not do the same for her? They were from ancient China. She thought of a woman going her whole life in candlelight. Outside a neighbor woman saw Lindy in the window and motioned her to come outside. Each pressed equally upon her.



## Razlog

Razlog was the projector. In Victorian times, which meant nothing to them, her zeal convinced her countrymen to rise up against the foreigners who occupied their lands. They went after Ohrid, an old man in a nun's habit whose beard hung long enough to cloak the military medals on his breast. "Let us strike at the source of Ohrid's wealth," Razlog said. They took his fields of grapes, and winery, and marched that same night upon him. In spite of their inebriation, he was unsuccessfully destroyed. They regrouped.

Villages, usually Bulgarian, debated what the next move should be. Many mentioned that Dubrovnik had the experience to lead. He was additionally old enough, with historic claims upon the region, to challenge those of the occupying empire. Dubrovnik spoke graciously. He almost promised to be diplomatic.

Razlog had no time for this usurper. She wanted a fight, not diplomacy. She called upon the Polish Catholics to honor old agreements and enter as her ally. When their council

neared a vote of no, she filibusted them by taking a rosary from her coat and reciting it the really really long way. Out of patience, they gave her their support against Dubrovnik's insurrection.

And after coordinating their armies near Lewotech, Razlog and the Poles turned towards Dubrovnik. The clash began in Summer and went on until the heavy flakes of snow. A thousand men were lost and hundreds more bewildered. Though both sides were weakened, neither would give in. The occupying Ottomans got many laughs from these reports.

On Christmas morning the cousin of Ohrid, gazing from the tallest mountain on his lands, saw that Razlog and Dubrovnik had up and disappeared. He put his youngest daughter on his shoulders, danced around, and sang as he released his peasants from his castle courtyard, reminding them to add the lost winery to their many debts. The peasants plowed the battlefields.



## Robert Burns

Robert Burns, being long a resident of S—, had to walk a fair wee while to reach Edinburgh Castle. He sat in its shadow out of the summer sun. He'd brought his inkwell and pen. He sat the book on his thighs and went about composing.

Overlooking a bustling street, he was distracted by a dye man. The latter was outside a shop dunking great canvas cloths into bins full of dye. The liquid sloshed onto the street and pooled amidst the cobblestones. The dye man's arms were stained that muddy tint when blue mixes with red. A portly woman, the same age and of some resemblance, the kind that comes from time spent close for years, trundled out. She unfolded part-way a bundle of cloth already dyed and dry. The fabric was softer than that canvas having the life wrung out of it in the churning bins. It was colored sweeter too. It was as though she had unrolled a copse onto the grimy street, with branches of yellow flavoring leaves and ripe pods dangerous with seed. If they fell and took root here, in the spittle streets of heady Edinburgh, industrial progress would e'er

therethen be halted.

Burns' papers sat twixt their boards regardless. He flipped backward through his book. Every pretty phrase was a scab to his flitting eyes. Frus-teration mounted. Just then brown water splashed from somewhere near. It had the gall typical of water and ran over his shoes, without a word, on its way downhill. If he'd lived with us, he could bleach the words and shoes the same. To towel the mis'ry from the sole and page. To get bit out and ne'er once feel bitten.

Up the dye man tossed the soaked canvas on the pile. He nodded his approval to the woman's bundle. The dye man could work prettily and as well he could work harsh, Burns thought. The hinged results were sated either way. Burns stood and walked out of the shade. His chin lifted on its own and his eyes climbed the irregular stones of the castle's wall. But he could not make them reach the top. They were stuck midway through the upper half. Slightly higher, slightly higher to pieces. But no. Those turrets spill brown water, upside down those top cups contain.



## Cultures of the Amazon

Upon arriving in Durdumi, customs detained me in order that their clinicians might graft the lasers onto my skin. It was a must for first-timers, as everyone in Durdumi had them. Indeed it was the law. The city's men with just a thought could blink like mirrorballs, and the women glow like prisms. Outdoor festivals were like the cores of galaxies. Even grocery stores got brighter when two friends chanced upon each other. Strangers shopping near them, smiling at their joyous encounter, could find themselves lighting up in turn, sending up a flare from aisle 13, relaxing frustrated queuers and cashiers gone past their break-time. In Durdumi, happiness was rarely some private affair.

Durdumians loved to go to expensive salons. There were countless treatments for the skin, to unclog the lasers, mute them, install colored glass, and widen or narrowize their nozzles, to name but a few. Body artists were on-staff to organize the lasers into shapes via the selective pigment system. As with where I'm from, dragons, wolves, and tigers were the three most popular. Myself I was

attracted to the topical operators, who can remote-control my intense skin lasers for me. I liked the idea of becoming a solo concerto of light. This fine vessel was new on me and because I lacked experience I wanted to be of use during my stay.

I don't know if you knew this, but a fluid be matter. That's what they say in Durdumi's rival city, Hebli, just across the river. There the natives, also from birth, dress themselves in fluids. They got more colors than Pantone, they brag. By recent scales of measurement the Heblian spectrum has more unique fluids than every fleck on every masterwork in a big-city museum has unique colors. Whenever they embrace, their fluids mingle and new colors appear.

Even so, the people of Hebli toil under that gravitational instance that affects us all. A fluid dripped atop of the head will not take long to travel to the feet and so must be replenished. They cannot be expected to walk beneath a portable shower head erewhere they want to go for all their life. Luckily for their culture, Heblians have an engineering expertise that is equaled only by their mastery of physics. They have found a way to make the 9th through 11th super strings work for them. From seeming nowhere colorful fluids of their choice constantly flow across their skin, disappearing afore the ground earth can collect them. It is essentially a fountain loop. Dimensions heat and cool the fluid, eliminating the necessity of pumps and suction. Simple convection stokes the coal, so to speak. This too is law.

For my countrymen, who lack the eccentricity of the Durdumians, and aren't whiz-bangers like the Heblians, life has its emptiness. We go about our days in simple clothes. We bathe and dry ourselves. But empty almost doesn't mean a particularly broken lifespan, for we have our small ways of connecting with each other. The most direct of these is the inverter. While in no way a gadget, it is a speed control. A tiny disk is the form in which it comes. And we ingest it. When we desire to go faster in our lives, the inverters suppress our laziness and sleep. Likewise when we desire to go slower, they remove our impetus to run. Perhaps because we have grown up in this way, it is as easy for us to recognize the same inverter in another as it is for a Durdumi woman to pick out her husband's mirrorballing lights from the curb of a street-wide protest march. In my country, we match our speeds to one another.

The branches of history carry these differing cities to their goal, that which the we of now can only aim to, so that the future us can touch. Durdumi and Hebli are ahead of us in this, it's true, with their creativity and expertise, but they give us something to aspire to. Non-history branches gradually wither, breaking from our city ground to nourish nothingness. Such branches were what carried all that's distrustful. Our conventionally ethnic disheveled associate is at home everywhere, almost.





## Martin's Grinds

Martin, 24, knew that emptying the wet coffee grounds daily would pre-empt the growth of spores within his colander. He just didn't wanna. He was critical on that. Only when it was too full to strain his morning cups would he up-end the colander and bang it against the lip of the rubber trash can. He'd been stubborn going back generations, though, and this banging would only dislodge a spoon or two. The rest of the grounds were like an infomercial sealant. A space if underneath that hairy drain, as it were, would have been enough to collect a tongue's displacement of fresh Joe. But it would have depended not on any sort of Martin.

Odd! be the resulting cup. At once solid and liquid, like a green tree frog it was a dweller of two worlds. Martin tilted the cup up to his open kiss, blowing on the surface of the sludge. The threat of being burned was practically the last nod to safety in his life. He'd first roll up his sleeve before trying a lighter. This prevented the wind from carrying a tiny ball of flame to his cotton cuff and igniting his shirt wholly as though

he'd felt a great explosion and said "Oh no" in time to be subsumed by the fireball raging up an elevator shaft. But drinking water steeped in mold - a laugh. He never even caught a cold, he'd be quick to say, using truth without getting cause and effect.

Martin liked his vice with variations. His life was filled with *zugzwang*. He hated to be forced to move. He hated obligation. He had the odor of a field tent that, shelled and fallen, had soaked up the discharge of a hundred fetid stumps. Still, he went out proudly. In the park shopping he repelled the other people - indeed he counted on it.

Once he passed a blind man, name of Dave.

"Discontinuous, that one," Dave said to his companion, gesturing with his thumb over his shoulder.

Martin saw that he was being pointed at. "Say, what do you mean by that?" Martin asked as a forceful declaration.

Dave stopped. He made to speak, but his companion, a long-haired mutt in a harness, tugged at the stiff lead and pulled them both away. "Notice who turns last," Dave said loudly anyway.

Martin stared after them. He was deciding what to do. In fact he had already decided but wasn't yet aware of it. He played through the fantasies of retaliation. The park path curved and Dave went out of sight. Eventually, Martin turned away.



## Their Infant Child

Wild skins stretched across bamboo lashings. They sat on their corners on four square pegs and this way stayed up off the hut ground. As cots went, laying on them put one's nose against something warm and distasteful.

"Bring me that which for my belly," said the male. "The roots, the red and purple roots."

"Cannot. The roots are not in season," said the female.

Prior to this contrary speech the male and female had never disagreed before. It was the century source, the font of all arguments to come.

The polar region from which they had turned back had specific animals. The male and female's clothes were warmer than they needed now. The coastline they followed had the clues for what the future days would bring. Shells on the beach suggested they armor themselves. Driftwood, water-logging and rotten, said they should care for what they had.

The remains of fish washed up or fallen from the sky piloted them south. It grew warmer as the grub grew more plentiful. The dinner plates practically made themselves. It took only bending and a fire. The much unplanned for could never be a worry in this land of just enough.

"How could our fathers have foregone this coast?" asked the female.

"They came from inland," said the other. "For to his ranks my father's only choice was go. Walk more than the herd does everyday."

The advancement as a core concept could belie nothing in the way of picture stories in their minds. It was as well the first denial, the font of all future insistence that what was in one's memory could never have been wrong. The purpose, this observation, disappointingly once made would never be forgotten. A learning organism applies that which will make it right for all and e'er more.

Whether gales ought to interrupt such speech so heartily as to drown it, to bury it within this earth, could only be proclaimed by some sentience. Alack sound is the first thing that follows birth, the male and female found this early on. The crossed legs be sighting bellies full and growing by the day. Time at first slowed down as all was at the whim of their infant child. They rerouted their needs and when he slept they slept. It was as though they were at sea, if they could have imagined such a thing. At sea there are no repairs. They could only use what they had around them,

and the bamboo and kelp upon the coast were preferable to those endless waves of nil.

With little wearing at their souls they continued down the coast, putting slippery hats on the child to stave it from the salt-tinged rain.



## David Attenborough's New Programme

David Attenborough: We have traveled to the mating damselflies of Sardinia.

The island's electrical periods coincide with the gendered insects getting in the mood. Their preferred grounds for procreation are over a given problem, the crags and kills of griffon vultures. While these birds' source of food is carrion, in their fit of hunger they will eat whatever nears their prey. Coupling insects not excluded.

The damselflies of Sardinia mate by locking abdomens, the puckered interconnecting. They remain in flight, the female and the male both trying to steer, their path in no apparent order. But if there's water nearby they will dip into it. Often they are chased by a second male. He tries to intervene. The couple is divided therewith. [*aside*] Are the data supporting me?

The male latches his object onto hers. Light between the objects froths the damselsperm.

But only part of the spectrum is obligatory. Fertilization, you see, is magenta-dependent. Suppose things appear, like the sun. Its direct untempered rays prevent hemopoiesis in the flies. Gold difficult, yet sunrise/sunset easy, due to its purply scattering. Within the female thorax, the converted matter's changed. Then there is the inserting but directly of the eggs into the pond. The product is a machine that best shows not all aquatic nymphs will sing.

The nymphs moult and moult again. The new damselflies take wing, their wobbling maturity. Even singly their flying is haphazard. They dine upon arachnids and learn to rile the griffons. In conclusion the brain stewards them throughout the stores of windborn Sardinians. Lord I have the runs. Separate image, this.

[*distantly*] Questions exist. And I have tried appreciably not to overdo them.



## Not My Step-Dad! No!

Fredo was plumbing an old Cisco router and, as he watched the Top command refresh itself, in his mind he was hastily creating stoppers. These were phrases ranging from non-committal to hostile that would stop a conversation dead. Like, "I figured *you'd* say that," or "I already explained that to Rajananthram." He hated talking to people, and if there was no getting out of it, he'd cut it short.

There was an airplane neck pillow under his chin that he hid with a beard kept to the length of his largest clip setting. He had eczema on his elbows. His right foot was missing half his second toe, lost one night in college when he passed out trying to throw up a pitcher of rum and Coke on the quad, to frostbite, in the snow. Campus security found him toward dawn and ambulated him. Step-dad wasn't happy at the cost. Fredo fantasized of mailing him the toe taped to a credit card.

The future belongs to the mains, he thought. We are the ones who have the knowledge. We're the car mechanics of today. People need us. We'll always be employed. No one knows what a



router is, but 90% of everybody has one. The supply is increasing along with the demand. You want to see the graphs I have saved on my TI-84? he asked his fictional antagonist, who followed him around. They be *destroying* your belief. No it isn't powerful. Something's powerful when it can outsmart *me*. All that's needed for *you* is this TI.

Fredo was certified to troubleshoot fiber-optic cable. He was protective of it in the underground. When they had to dig to reach it for repair, oftentimes the ditch diggers would find homeless children sleeping by the cable. The e-m field messed with the glucose in their bloodstream. It got them high and kept them warm to boot. But the situation of discovery was bad. Homeless children monetarily reduced what Fredo could expect to earn. The law said whoever discovered homeless children became responsible for them. They were automatically added to the finder's taxes owed. The only way around it was to leave the country, or finesse a darknet hitman as the discovery law did not apply to their corpse. While he felt discouraged when it happened, Fredo paid up, and the homeless children had some few days of schooling until their malformed natures sent them creeping to the hardware store for glue. Recently the problem had decreased - not that the world had gotten kinder - since gauges came to detect the body warmth of children getting high on fiber-optic cables underground. The most popular gauges are worn like masks, Predator style.

Fredo fantasized of burning down his step-dad's house, a pre-fab with aluminum siding in

cream with periwinkle trim. It had some reckless Dupont plastic fencing, not to mention PVC. He'd do it too, Fredo would, but his dog was there, and it was *his* dog. Step-dad kept it. Still it would only take a bit of care in planning. He'd merely set the fire more in the portion of the house where his step-dad passed out every night, the breakfast nook, and make sure it burned itself out before it reached Rufus in the bay window. In each room there was fuel to be accounted for: cushions, curtains, mattresses. Although in both Step-dad and dog there was barking, only the man bit and attacked stupidly. In having life both had the potential for trust, but a connection - that could only occur if there was empathy. Just Rufus had that. Perhaps a nozzle hose to spray foam around the window, so that it's flammable, Fredo dreamed up.

The part of the fiber-optic cable he was working on that day was free of homeless children. If only the city had listened to him and budgeted enough funds to sprinkle the whole line in speakers playing modern country hits, the homeless children'd stay away. But at least he wouldn't be paying out of pocket for model glue today. In that the testing of the cable incurred only the aesthetic cost, the cutting down of the 100 year old elm in the way and the tractor-led uprooting of its stump. But they'd brought in a tree farm to plant a sapling in its place, once the cable was reburied, indicating this was different than the past, when Fredo could run around outside during a snowfall, two deep into the boxes of a muck-like Cabernet.

That evening feeling flush on his full salary (no homeless children needed to deduct from it), he saved his game of Civ and logged out even though the Dutch were getting fidgety. In only the second search string he found a list of materials that would not leave the tell-tale sign of arson and that could ignite remotely. Some recommended lubrication. His reptile brain said nothing easy, no. Everything else he followed attentively. It was only late that night when he whimpered in his neckbeard and so awoke himself that it hit Fredo what he'd done. Waiting on the new ringtone, he prepared himself to best sound shocked and grieved.



## The Missing Checks

These are the things that happened, and some things I embellished. Now that I've grown up and moved away, it's like back then I received a one-man raise. And I keep it secret. I'm the lucky one. All talking about Sherree and the missing checks ended. May that she ended too.

I could be more insulting. The currency of memory, the barter and exchange, rips off the recipient. This upsets me so I demand that I live in the now.

Don't only have it, Sherree used to say, you yourself should spend it. This was in reference to the missing checks. I knew she had them. I didn't act. So I was an accomplice. Can't poets both be there and not be there? I asked her. You're helping me, she said, now put the book down. Motive-one was staying in her good graces, which is to say her bed.

The layout decorator slipped Sherree the key. In the back of two paintings hung side by

side, a big ol' safe in the wall. She described it to me later. It was like a Caesar cypher, the key showed how many numbers to add to get the correct combination, in this case 26. She said this while fanning the checks in my face. That little wind was distasteful, it smelled like rotting meat. The cash, the gold, the jewels, they weren't there? I asked. This set her off, and in turn her demeanor set me off, an old noisy contrast.

Two days later when we were speaking again she told me, in reference to my question, Clearly we must bring the only woman with the bio-security to get us inside. I hadn't wanted anyone else to be involved. Then help me, she said exasperated. I went out.

When she and the woman went to exchange the checks for gold I packed up our apartment and waited for her at the train station. At some point in the night I must have dozed. I woke to the confusing kind of dawn that could have been full moonlight, but was not. It starts as pale as background stars, changes, grows. It does not preserve itself, not like my loss. I wonder if she saw me sleeping. I wonder if she showed up at all.



## Images of an Elephant and a Dolphin in the Womb

Who is the viable one here? Is it the fetal elephant, who air-piloted a boat to China in the 15th century? Conceived by two mid-caste elephants to be a Brahmin, he was taken from an educational city in the Punjab and sold to the Chinese for a dollar. The great Admiral Zheng He put the f.e. under his tunic when he (He) disembarked for his native Yunnan. It would be a feat as Yunnan is hundreds of miles inland. The f.e. having sensed the approach of the flagship into port flapped his ears and whinnied, but the admiral ignored him.

He (f.e.) pulled the umbilical cord from his navel and inserted his wiry trunk-snout in its place. The admiral, who'd held the f.e. against his belly all the way from Ceylon, to feel it kick, was startled when that night his cabin began to glow. He looked down and was amazed. It was coming from within his tunic. He (He) tucked his junk before lifting the garment's hem.

"Urobobo bobo or us," He gasped at the sight.

"...Auror bor?" he hissed? But it wasn't.

His cabin door launched opened and the first mate yelled that the ship was on the coastal rocks. Admiral He's reply is unrecorded. History was racist and concerned only with the West then. But we do know at the perceived unholy glow the first mate threw himself at the fetal elephant on He's lap, and when he (f.m.) touched it, he was turned into a map of Asia. Too accurate for its time, it looked fake and was discarded.

The first crack was heard as the bow struck the rocks. The admiral, busy with his proto-television, did not respond to his crew and their pointing. The f.e.'s glow intensified. The great boat lifted up out of the water and flew through the air way over present-day Vietnam to the Yunnan province. It landed majestically atop a cliff, but the cliff was muddy, and the ship slid down the side gaining speed until it reached the town square and obliterated a breakfast seminar.

Or is it the fetal dolphin, who swam the amniotic to redress wrongs like a tough hombre and who will one day succeed his father as the King of France? The dolphin's umbilical cord looks like a fish hook.



## LDR

I have a Valentine for you, Daina. I'll give it to you when I'm in Riga soon. I say it's soon but it might be half a year. It depends on what my dad will make me do. He intends to cut the tree that fell in our backyard into firewood, but all we have in the garage is a rusty saw without electric motor. My shoulders, back, and arm all hurt already.

Your small thanks for the blouse I gave you back on your birthday has got me worried. I tried not to pick out something that's not your taste again. You told me not to get you something, but that's not an order I can follow. There's something to my resolution to try to be happy while I'm away. Like you always say, it's a problem-based world.

I have your letters open here beside me while I write you. They're held down by little rocks on the slatted table. The wind is blowing and the clouds are separated. It's dark for a minute but then the sun comes out again and the paper reflects too brightly in my eyes.

I'm following those things you said. I have it



here: "Don't go to the bars at night, Dain, my love. The roughnecks and those selling cassettes on the sidewalk that they stole from someone's car will find a way to hurt something inside you." So I won't tell you that I went there once, one night when I was missing you, though the only hurt that happened is that everyone at the bar ignored me. I know that you'll bite the dead skin from your nails in fear and worry. In myself you sound the best. Your next letter would say: "Jesus, Dain, I didn't want to know."

How ones about this old downtown don't feel enough to matter. It doesn't feel historic here at all. This distinct letter put a heavy weight on the others in the mailbox. Open it upside down, Daina. When you pull out the flap, the underside is red - that's my tongue.

I almost feel an ownership of you. But it's not like that - I'm entitled to the love we have between us. I'm a part-owner of it.

I can face the sooty stone wall at my job and see you there in Riga. Between leading all the kids about, and taking class at night, how will you ever invent the thing we talked about that will guarantee my joy? I want a device, a little chip, worn in the vertebrae, that will direct my body through the day, so my brain can stay asleep and dream of you. I want us to be together now. I don't want to know our separation - it's like a painted death. If it's not the real thing, then why do I have to see it?

So stay, my empty Bambi. Stay safe and stay

devoted to the love that you're part-owner of.  
And I won't let the toil of being awake faze  
me. The pagans here do what they do - prime us  
for disappointment. But they don't know I am a  
future century and they're long forgotten.



## Melody and the Shot

Melody rang the iron bell vigorously, its clapper making quite a racket. The gaucho's wife emerged from the dark pen where she'd been feeding the animals. She walked slowly up to Melody, her hands placed backwards on her hips so that the thumbs were in front, trying with this kind of support to straighten her stiff back. Melody waved. The ground was a dusty yellow and had someone come to weed it til no green would be left. It was a slight hill up to the cross-beam gate but it may as well have been mountain steps for the effort it took the gaucho's wife. She sent little rocks skittering down behind her.

Their convergence together discouraged the moles under the ground, and they lay still long after all vibrations stopped.

"Good morning," Melody said, pulling back her hat so her face lit up in the sun. Her petticoats were in the prairie style. She couldn't get used to them or to the black buckled shoes she wore. Dungarees and boots were more comfortable but would've been off-putting to those out here. "The county sent

me. I'm a nurse. I'm here to give your children vaccinations. Are they home?"

"Their Pa took them on the cattle drive," the gaucho's wife said. "I don't expect them back for some days."

"Well, I can return. It's no trouble. How many children do you have?"

"Two boys."

"Ages?"

"Old enough to ride."

"Have they been vaccinated before?"

"I don't reckon. They've never seen a doctor. My youngest had the whooping cough a couple summers back."

"He didn't give it to the rest of you?"

"No he didn't. He slept in the pen until it passed. He loves them animals."

"And you, have you been vaccinated?"

The gaucho's wife paused, staring darkly. She pushed up the sleeves past her tree-knot elbows until the thickness of her upper arms would let them go no farther. She checked the bun in her ruddy hair. It was tight. Hands that corded firewood could not style it any other way. She stepped back, half-turning.

"How much you asking for it?"

"Nothing," Melody said. "The county has enough to give to everybody. It's for the health of our society."

"We ain't in no society, back to my grandmama and papa."

"I know it, and I respect you for it. But there's a sickness going around. Even if you never see people, it's in the air."

The wife cleared her throat and spit.

"You can catch it from your livestock too." Melody pulled the strap through the clasp on her bag, lifted the cowhide flap, and showed her. "This will cure it. Mind you if you get it, you'll be laid up a long time. Who can put down their work to do yours?"

"Could be anything in that," the gaucho's wife said, nodding at the needle.

"This is medicine. I'm a nurse." Melody took out the paper with her qualifications on it. "The sickness has been sending some folks to the Lord. You can keep your boys from ever getting it."

Ah but perturbation will separate one's reason from itself, and confusion will grow in the empty patch between. Golden rings linked together for years will magically disconnect. This certainly can come upon one in the middle of a normal task performed without thought. Gatherings try the herd, forcing one to

unconsciously compete, establishing his or her new status. A recent menace is what often seals the hierarchy, wherein everybody acquiesces to the winning male and female. Besides battle with another group, the other thing that allows for shift in status is a wedge-driving fad. One will put things in her face, scars and plates, and another won't. One's status will go up or down is what likely happens. Hearing the social offers even when they are not clear is essential. Only then can one determine how to lubricate one's status. At times the offers' deprivation is the better choice, at others it is their acceptance. It is most difficult to choose when the offer comes from someone from outside the group. One or any rider passing by has something new for sale. Perhaps the point introduces a conflict in the group. The eternal question raises up again: should one choose isolation or get involved with something new? History shows that on a long enough scale a border's arbitrary and is always crossed. The isolationism game is how many generations they can accumulate untouched, and what they can build in that time before contact changes them, so that what remains after their extinction will offer something archaeologically unique to the culture of the world. But sex and interestingly the willful ignorance thereof can offer a rearrangement of one's status. Virility and its counterpart fertility are usually esteemed. Cults however create an urban blight upon one's feelings and desires. Confusion, something greater than a patch, will grow in such sullied waste. It gives rise to uselessness. This feeling of one's uselessness is what cripples the

striving for the better and the new. Once one succumbs to this, status is incumbent on one's ability to simply stand the residue.

In other words the gaucho's wife refused the shot.



## The Peppercorn Seminar

Welcome. My name's Calvin Peppercorn, just like it says on the poster. (Point to the entrance of the ballroom, pause for laughter.) I will not thank you for coming to this event, but I will tell you that it's the best decision that you've ever made. Once this afternoon is over, your career is going to change for the better. Not only will you get exactly where you've always wanted to be, you'll find yourself going even further. If this thought scares you now, by the end of the day I promise you it won't.

I noticed as I was riding in the limo that brought me from the airport to my luxury suite on the top floor of this beautiful hotel that your town has no mass transportation. Show of hands, how many of you bought your car outright? How many leased? How many take the bus and I better not see a single hand? (Pause for laughter.) Oh there is one. You sir think of yourself as brave. You admit you ride the bus after what I said. Well now you have two choices. Come sit on the floor at the front, right here, or take your butt outside and get your refund from my girl. Because either



you're a budding genius, who needs a little push to get to the top, or you don't have a nickel of ambition, riding the bus, and this event doesn't need you. (If he comes to the front, pause for the applause. Else talk over his exit.)

Whether you own or lease your car is not important. Remember this, because it's part of my main point. We all make decisions in our lives. Some of us choose A, some of us choose B. But few of us are happy with our choice. The vast majority of you sitting in our audience either regret your choice, how you ended up in your work situation, or else you are resigned to it. You have a family to think of. The market's not in good shape. The thing you really loved in college would not make you a living. Look at your neighbors. Go on, look around. Not one of them will admit that's how they feel, but it is. You have so much in common. Except for that one guy wearing Google Glass. The rest of you aren't that kind of dork. (Pause for laughter.)

Here's the deal. All of us have made choices to end up exactly where we're at, and none of us are thrilled about it. The other thing we have in common is what makes us better than every single person we passed on our way to this event, and I want you to write this down on your Peppercorn pads. It's that we're hungry. We want more from our work. We don't want to assist on a project anymore, we want to lead it. We don't want to be the team lead anymore, we want to be the department manager. We want more money! (Pause for cheering.)

But there's one problem. We don't know quite how to get there. If we did, we wouldn't be in this audience, we'd be the one in the Italian shoes on stage under the lights with a mic clipped to our ear. So do we feed our hunger? How do we move up at work?

The answer is in the confession I have to make to all of you right now. This is difficult for me, because I spent my whole life hiding it. But I'm going to tell you, my friends. I, Calvin Peppercorn, have a condition known as antisocial personality disorder. In everyday language, I'm a sociopath. (Don't pause here.) And I want to work for you.

How can the executive at your company lay off a hundred workers during the day and then give his kid a big hug and ice cream after the soccer game? Why does he waste the resources to take a helicopter to a meeting five miles away? How can he have an open door policy, pull you aside to thank you for the extra hours you've been putting in, tell jokes to your husband at the Christmas party, and then promote someone else? How did he make VP before the thousand other MBAs in the first place? (Pause for exclamatory grunts.) The answer is, he's a sociopath.

Why is your boss such a retard? (Pause for laughter.) And yours? (Pause.) And definitely yours? (Long pause for laughter.) It's because that's the way the sociopath executive wants it. If something goes wrong, he's got a fall guy. A simpering stooge to blame it on. Someone else to get fired, not him. And if something good happens? Your boss is such a

Sally that the exec will wrest the credit from him. Either way, a sociopath will always come out on top.

So that's your problem. You my friends are not sociopaths. How can you expect to compete against one? Once in a while you have to act cheerful at work if your kid gave you hell that morning. But the exec has to act 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Otherwise he'd be in jail. He has to learn people. Writers can't carry the smallest putter in his golf bag. The one, the best observer of how people behave, is the sociopath. He has to be, in order to blend in with regular folks. He sees what makes you successful. He spots all your weak points and all your tiny flaws. Worse for you, he uses them against you. And worst of all, it doesn't bother him a bit, so he doesn't mind doing it over and over for his 30-year career. He doesn't care! He can cancel a contract that throws a bunch of people out of work. He can railroad people getting laid off, taking advantage of their shock, to get them to sign something giving up their right to sue in exchange for a paltry one week's severance. It always happens on a Friday, you know. And he can take his boat out the next morning, standing at the wheel, a white visor shading his eyes from the sun, and feel as happy as you do holding your newborn child.

He has a great life, and you can't compete with him to obtain what he has. But there's someone who can. Me, Calvin Peppercorn. So you, the bus man, sitting on the floor like you're back in gym class. (Pause for laughter.) I'm willing to offer you, if you

decide right now, my Barbarian Package. That's a one-on-one face-to-face personal consultation with me. You get one hour to describe to me the exact situation you're in at work, how you're treated, the personalities of your allies, what you've observed about your enemies, the things your boss has you doing, and you can ask me any question you want. I'll tell you, as a sociopath, exactly what I would do in your shoes to break you out of the trap you're in and get you where you want to be. That's one hour of my expertise for only \$299. Are you ready to step up? Because if you're not, that guy right there is! (Point out someone in the crowd, pause for applause.) That lady there is too! Look, she's actually getting in her purse for her credit card! (Even if she's not. Pause for cheers.)

Okay bus man, I know you don't want to ask for it, but something tells me your office politics are so bad that you think an hour's not enough. Good thing for you there's my Predator Package! (Pause for applause.) With this you get the one hour, face-to-face conversation, plus the password to my private, members-only message board, where once a week you can post a question to me and I'll answer it myself. You can update me on your progress from our consultation, about any new sticky situations that have arisen, and I'll tell you exactly what a sociopath like your company executive would do to get out of it, improve his lot, and come out on top. In the meantime, the rest of the week, you'll be able to log in and chat with other members, who can share their own advice and experience based on the winning path I gave them! And that's only \$999

for one whole year! (Pause for cheers.)

Hang on everybody, hang on. The bus man hasn't leapt to his feet like that guy, and that pretty lady in the back! (Point, pause for applause.) I'm sorry, madam, but I'm married. (Pause for laughter.) Do you mind if I share with our friends what you're thinking, bus man? Your career is going so badly you're barely hanging on. They've already got you answering calls, covering for the receptionist when she goes to lunch. Sometimes they change the time of the meeting and don't bother to cc you. When the exec visits the floor and goes around shaking hands, he talks loudly to your cubicle mate, keeping his back to you and then moving on. You're in serious danger of being unemployed this time next week. Well, I'm willing to extend to you, today only, my most personalized package, the Terminator! (Pause for applause.) You get the one-on-one consultation. You get the weekly follow-up Q&A, and the access to colleagues doing better than you on my private message board. But at this level there is something extra special. I will give you my private cellphone number. (Pause for gasps.) Can you believe it? I'm not kidding. You can text me once per day and I will respond. Say you have an emergency at work. Say your boss suddenly says he's going to put you on the one project that the whole office knows is failing. Say they suddenly want to give your performance evaluation tomorrow. What do you do if you have to wait 6 days for the next Q&A? What do you say to him? With the Predator Package, you'll have the perfect answer within minutes. You'll have Calvin Peppercorn, MBA, CPA, experienced

businessman - sociopath - at your beck and call. (Pause for cheers.) Only \$4,999 for an entire year! Much much less than what you'll lose being unemployed!

So stave off unemployment! Get all the things you've ever wanted! Be the one in charge! Who wants to sign up for a package right now! (Musical crescendo, the room erupts.)



## Unconvinced

We found the purple postcards in a drawer beneath her underwear. It was Summer 1942 and the house had not yet been stripped. We entered with the hidden key. She told us where it was, in the side yard in the lantern hanging on the pole curved like a candy cane. The house was warmer than the outside air. We took off our coats. How much louder hardwood stair-steps crack when they're walked in silence, without even the faint humming of a fridge.

The upstairs windows were intact. No animals had gotten in. We saw nothing, not spiders and no webs. The place was neater than we thought that it would be. What was in the spare bedroom was all put away. Nothing touched the closets' floor. The throw-rug in her bedroom had a film of dust and hair, as did the chair in the corner, the film on its seat and the padding on the wooden arms fixed by knobbed rivets. We ran our fingers down them in remembrance.

The cards, there were a stack of them. We shared their reading, each handing the one

just read over to the other. Words stick better in the brain when they are read aloud, so we kept our voices closed. Her ideas written on them warmed us for a moment and then ran off us like a shower.

We took a breath when we were done. There was no bonus in our finding, and the significant records in the torn accordion file had no import and listed nothing that would tell us something new about her life. Following this we worked through the other rooms, the kitchen with the still flat linoleum, cabinets proving that dried paint touching dried paint can make a seal like glue, the family room with more wooden-legged furniture, as stationary as a pall, and the basement whose cement walls were two-toned suggesting flooding when it rained. The bottom part was murky, above it was more clear. Tinselly we remarked we'd found no money, nor certificates of stock, and were it buried in the basement it could stay there for another, though the rising waters ought to have carried it almost to the top.

We could either leave or sit a spell. Though it bothered both our backs we pulled the dining table apart, set down the leaf, and pushed it back together. Well, she had the people once to need it. We spread the cards out in a grid. Whatever printing ink they'd used had found some trace viscosity, in those years in the stack, and it smeared the picture sides into an even glop. So we turned them over and let her words announce themselves into that room whose convincing sense of shelter had once encouraged our free talk.



She'd wrote about her naps so much she seemed a sleep collector. Her words were cuddly. They had us build on partial memories. We became amazed at what we had forgotten.

There were strange phrases on the postcards too, "the popgun contains photos," as though we'd pull the trigger and rather than a flag with Bang! it would appear the portrait of a face, maybe hers when she was young. She had a half-aptitude for photography. She ought to have gone farther, she had an easy Hi.

The house grew indistinct as evening fell upon it. We still had the drive ahead, the vacation we had planned. So we made an agreement before we left. Each of us recorded nothing it was making.



## Sister City

“As 1,060 of the towns in Turkey have applied to be our sister city,” said the mayor, “it presents us with a problem. We cannot reasonably expect that even our most traveled citizens have visited more than a percent of these towns. So how can we pick a winner? Voting for which town gets the honor strikes me as unfair. You agree. (Indeed voting as a concept is unfair. I deserve this job, you agree.) Well anyhow, I’ve decided to turn the problem over to our superteam. I announce to the cameras here, Operation: Renegade!”

The curtain behind the podium fell. There, standing in spotlights from the wings, was our city’s superteam. They posed dramatically around the hood of a buffed steel green Bradley tank. A man in overalls ran from the side and carried off the podium as the mayor clipped a wireless mic behind one ear.

“Hawk Mountain Man!” yelled the mayor, sweeping her arm from we the audience to the superteam. Hawk Mountain Man jumped down from the turret and a tremor rippled across the stage, causing the mayor in her high heels to

stagger. A pair of golden wings spread wide from HMM's back. Then a beak bit the collar of his flannel shirt, and the real hawk pulled itself upright onto his shoulder. HMM raised in one triumphant fist the 12-point buck Antlers of Providence. It glinted in the spotlight, and twelve brown sparrows alighted on it. The hawk took note and picked out its kill.

"Tiki Nephew!" yelled the mayor. The sound of tribal drumming filled the stage. Two teens put something on their tongues and started dancing. Our shirtless hero yelled something in a foreign language, which sounded hollow from behind his grotesque mask. The tank turret shot a burst of flame, which lit Tiki Nephew's torches. He spun them like a drum major, then stuck them in the holders on the stage. It was then that we could make it out: the torches were in the shape of a one and a seven. Tiki Nephew'd turned 17 today.

"Chimp Castaway!" yelled the mayor. The chimp bared her teeth and beat her chest. The tail of her tied headband flapped from side to side, and in her enthusiasm she clawed another hole in her tattered Hawaiian shirt. The stagehand in overalls led a man in from the wings. He was handcuffed and in prison orange. Chimp Castaway took him by the hand and forearm and without much strain broke his wrist. CC did the same to his other wrist, slipped the cuffs off without unlocking them, and twirled them by one finger while blowing salivary kisses at us.

"But this cannot be," said a reporter to the

mayor. "You know Turkey's perception of our city. They said we couldn't secure enough cotton to make a Q-Tip. Don't you think they'll be suspicious we suddenly have the technology to create a superteam?"

"I was betrothed to Hawk Mountain Man in that field of cotton," said the mayor, pointing yonder. "It made a beautiful backdrop, like I held his scarred and callused hand among the fluffy clouds. The pics are on my campaign site."

Another reporter asked, "It took the interest of the previous mayor to find a sister city here. The program is meant to spread goodwill among disparate peoples. What makes you sure these are the right ambassadors?"

"They've passed every test my office has given them," said the mayor, leaving out that zero tests were given. "Why Tiki Nephew is like an ancient hieroglyphic, smashed half the time, and stiff. Turks are renowned drinkers - their Muslim faith aside - and both them like to smoke. He'll fit in. As for my Hawk Mountain Man, his withdrawal from society occurred on the 19th of June, 2009, during a trip to South Africa. He went dredging in river silt for the remains of australopithicenes. He was stuck chest-level when a grassland elephant approached. With its trunk it took his camera off its tripod and smashed it on the rocks. He stretched out his hand, begging it to pull him free, but the elephant went past him to the river for a drink. It knew that he'd been tainted by the modern world. Anyhoot he moved out of our home and went to live in the woods."

Didn't you, dear?"

Hawk Mountain Man said nothing, but his hawk let out a scream.

"As for Chimp Castaway, she believes this world is Babylon, and bad guys deserve what they get. At heart she loves Jah."

With that the mayor thanked everyone. The superteam got in the tank and left for Turkey. They crossed the salt flats, the pale epidermal. They rode over the mounts of most of Central Asia, angering the horsemen. Tiki Nephew was behind the wheel when the tank crashed through the ruins of the old wall that once protected Constantinople. By ancient prophesy, whosoever crushes the walls of Byzantium to their final dust becomes owner of the Vatican, bought and paid for. Hawk Mountain Man was married and Chimp Castaway was too used to being alone. By burning Western heretics, Tiki Nephew became the most popular pope in a hundred years. And Istanbul became our sister city.



## The Vein

Jin walked in circles, contemplating of powered wigs that drive the body, to complete tasks while the mind goes to sleep, things to make him go up, improve, get smarter and live longer, he, the human. His sister Tan came out of the urgent care center. It was nearing evening and the dried-out grass was crispy under their feet.

“That bandage on your head,” Jin said, pointing, wanting to touch it, “is very white. Usually bandages are woven strands, but this one looks cottony.”

“That’s urgent care for you,” Tan said. “These private shits got more money.”

“Set their emails to forward right to father. You don’t wanna see how much they’ll charge for stitches.”

“I already know. I already paid it.”

Tan, impatient with the wind, pulled her black hair behind her ear. One strand was stuck under the bandage and she winced.

“Drive me over to father’s,” she said.

“What about your car?”

“They ain’t gonna tow it. That sign there’s a big bluff. That grey car’s been in the same spot for days.”

Once the years pulled the stinger from their memories, they could stand to visit him again. He was old. He needed two new hips, but he was stubborn.

In the act of turning the front door knob, Tan knocked. And although she adopted pleasant manners, it was plain to Jin that the visit was a chore for Tan, some thing to check off her to-do list. Clouds of cigarette smoke rose from the couch cushions when they sat. Their father was in his La-Z-Boy, picking at something on the armrest with his largest veiny finger. After some time of him not asking about her head, Tan went to check the pantry and the fridge.

Jin got up. He bent forward in front of his father, blocking the TV. Then he hauled off and smacked him on top of his head.

“It looks like you have enough food,” Tan called from the kitchen. “Is there anything you need?”

Her father met Jin’s eyes. “No,” her father said. He had to clear his throat and repeat it to be heard. Jin lowered his hand.

"That's just to remind you," Jin said quietly, "in case you forgot." Then raising his voice, he continued, "You look cold, dad. Here, let's put your cap on. The game's on later." But the cap concealed the red palm print on his bald head.

After Father they visited a couple of whatever, guys they knew from around, who'd not amounted to much more than bandits. Tan told Jin to, y'know, shock the guys and that, until they adjusted the unfortunate boundaries they thought they had to cling to, their oath of banditry. But they did, and they told Tan what she wanted to know, even answering the answers before she got another question out.

The last thing she told them was, "I want the money for my trip to urgent care, too."

In his car, as she was putting her wallet in her purse, Jin asked, "Are you feeling good to drive yet?"

"Just head down to The Spins," she said.

The Spins was where, at this time of year, the cluster of four tidal pools by the lip of the sea became whirlpools, and they spun the same as draining bathwater.

They got out of the car and hiked the red igneous trail to the caves. Tan turned on her flashlight and then she led them in. It smelled like bat poo. She kept the flashlight level, trying not to wake them, not thinking that it was her feet, not the light, that should've been the worry.



"There they are," she said.

She guided the flashlight over the far wall, illuminating in yellow turn all the petroglyphs. The characters were angular and flat.

"These are the men, researchers that made the pyramid. This the army, and these are the cavalry women. They were probably painted when the pyramid was first conceived, before they began to build. This tells the story the people wanted to occur. With all their work, it did. They put their future on the wall before it happened. These glyphs are 15,000 years old, Jin."

"I hate museums," he said. "C'mon, the game. I already have to start it on the radio."

Tan said, "I have a collector lined up who'll pay a million for them."

"A million."

"First we get our advance. Thereafter the carving. You're the one who has to cut them out in blocks to 10 cm deep."

Jin sighed. "But these artifacts age older than my back."

"Smile, Jin. It's like we found the largest vein." And Tan switched off the light.



## Academia

Virginia Simpson was wary of new foods she hadn't tried. It was not a lack bravery but a lesson learned. Once in Dushanbe she was given a snack. It looked like molded peanut brittle. When she asked what it was, her host family said it was pistachio. They must not have thought its liver flavoring notable. After that not only did she insult half the city by refusing offered sustenance, but she changed her major to food science. She wanted to know what everything on a label was. She specialized in food safety, emphasizing agriculture. As a grad student she was part of a team that cut the occurrence of *perfringens* in gas station chicken salad. They switched the packaging to a coarser wrap.

It was as though Virginia had completed a Native American spirit quest. What she wanted as a child became her life as an adult. She'd go into the private sector first to make money, and then 10 or 15 years later return to academia to give something back.

At this point in the lab a medicine man moved toward her at speed. He was Art Towers Tuner,

a graduate advisor. Following his encouragement, she wrote a paper and made him a co-author. The other Ph.D's knew his reputation, but they were in competition with her. Everyone was keeping cover.

Like a horse thief he claimed the credit for himself. He knew *perfringens* could make his career. He was relentless, causing fracking earthquakes in the 20 best food safety programs in the world. Virginia had the data. She defended herself. But Art was an orchestral conductor. He was that single-minded oaf who wants a thing so hard that he will make those around him sick until he gets it. They fight awhile but then give up just to regain their health. The two histories went into the field, along with a copy-catted third (serves him right), and out of this batch only his was selected. For Virginia the future trees grew shorter ever after.



## Carbohydrates

Carbohydrates are acids. They're not acids, but they are, and with proteins they form the possible molecules. Bianca made this first determination. Owing to the established, selected sequence, she chose the carbohydrates as the basis for her lab-created lifeform. One representing nature.

Such building accumulation coined the name she would give the lifeform: Sugar. Sugar was born on a lab computer running Scientific Linux. From 2010-2012 Bianca programmed, tested, and then adjusted the sequence of the new genome, one coded purely on a carbohydrate. Most of this time was spent getting just one segment right. Once she had that, she had her model. One sequence became the direct father.

Bianca rediscovered the necessities pressing this structure, conceived on OTC cold medication, and now alive. She resented taking breaks to eat and sleep. When it got warm she tied her black hair up with rubberbands, then wiped the follicle oil off her hands on her

labcoat. She only washed it when she couldn't stand it. Sugar would not have these hassles.

She searched for a place where Sugar would thrive, an environment conducive to its self-replication. But she didn't know enough about how habitats functioned. She put the code on github as free and open source. It was downloaded in the tens of thousands. Genome theory was over. The static sequences were king.

"Mining helps biology," she wrote below her blog's tip jar. "Regulatory species, of the world, first had to dig before they might construct their thoughts."

So the world's governments could learn about the self-replicating carbohydrate and how they might go into private business with a patent, scientists sent her a lot of emails. In response to one pun-master, she admitted, "The code may assemble virtually another protein. It may begin in trace amounts, but a viable environment would support more duplication. Future literature will tell. But what will it be printed on? And if not printed, will we be able to read it?"

Others took it from there.

*"The most exciting thing about a hawk is the way in which it can create life from the still earth by conjuring flocks of birds into the air."* -J.A. Baker



## Of the Super-State

### 1.

The first very necessary addition for the super-state is continuation. His colleagues said that the most permanent crisis was “the crisis of Barry Levinson’s struggle for effective treatment, for Barry Levinson has an idea, and that idea is craniofacial prosthesis.” Like the Man in the Iron Mask. Each head has its own shape for craniofacial prosthesis, and Barry Levinson must determine what that shape is, and how he can best fit that head into a prosthesis. This is what the Soviets call Expansionism, and it is Barry Levinson’s funeral if he can’t determine a head’s shape and fit it to a prosthesis. Which is to say, the craftsmanship dolled out upon the head should be skillfully quick, as there is the danger of suffocation, and Barry Levinson must apply well the knowledge he has learned, and his bedside manner, as the patient usually struggles. What he knows is that the head’s shape will be like that of its parent heads’, based on what that Frenchman learned from pollinating flowers, and would furthermore resemble more the parent whose private life is full up with skulduggery. “The criminal brow,” as a renown craniofacialist

has said, "is always present on the faces of the offspring of your everyday poltroon," e.g. those whose concept of evidence stretches no further than a prime-time cop drama. Unless Barry Levinson remembers this is so, he cannot graft with certainty the right prosthesis onto the deserving head, as his job demands, and all his skill and craftsmanship will bit by bit erode. It is such a misapplication which creates big confusion among recipients who, after spending their lives following the law, find themselves prosthesized, which severely damages their concept of self, as well as their tolerance for reflective surfaces.

Continuation is necessary for the super-state in the appearance of its people and in the manner they behave in. First what is vital is rankling autonomy, and this must not only be done when the people are awake, asleep, dozing off, and stubbornly staying in bed in a mind-fog after the alarm has rung, but when they are on drugs, including anaesthesia, and all types of vegetative states, for all the means by which life may express itself must be covered, regardless of doubt. Doubt is a hyperactive disorder. Rankling their autonomy shows the people that they are each but a piece of the super-state, and that their on-average homely appearance causes their desire to tread the criminal path. Barry Levinson said that the candidates for craniofacial prostheses "try to undergo intellectual adjustment on their own which the super-state says will benefit them, not realizing it's the resultant acne from not being able to wash that makes them accept the prosthesis. Such is

the urge for community within the people, and the best way to be admitted to a group is to parrot what it says." And Barry Levinson also said: "Anyone who volunteers for the prosthesis without possessing a genetic marker of criminality will be called lavishly unstable, and put into a group of magnates and impresarios, until such time as her thoughts and behavior have become completely changed, and she has become one of them. Then she will be guided into leadership, and that is the Good Life." To craft prostheses is to craft Continuation, and to wear it is to be a member.

## 2.

The next addition for the super-state is Analysislessness. It is very easy for the super-state to conduct analysis when it gathers information, but less easy is this adoption, first theorized in a Barry Levinson movie.

As Barry Levinson said in *Hot l Baltimore*: "At the desk of a big shot general, all objectivity dies; meanwhile the objective is to get all five stars." Barry Levinson also said in *Street Girls* that all analysis dies "when personal gain is king." This is the module which is played, that the Grishnackh shall not be allowed to stab the Destructor; that is, that the people shall not control the super-state. This module is played in the



world in real time, and with Barry Levinson, whose job is to influence the moviegoer's emotion, the hidden goal will be to analyze, and to analyze well. For sure, unless his analysis is finished, analyzing is not his job, for the ability to analyze is relevant to the ability to write/produce/direct.

Barry Levinson once said that the super-state must however reach the state of analysislessness, wherein analysis is not undergone because it is not necessary. All information will be collected and categorized in real time, as it occurs. Categorization will happen in milliseconds, and the interrelation of the categories will have been mapped out by Barry Levinson long before. Thus each new piece of information is analyzed not by searching for keywords or generating reports, but by its Platonic is-ness, and occurs in the space between two ticks of seconds. It is beneficial that the super-state exists in a world where not much new happens, and whatever newness could occur is the fine gradient of a color that has been known for eons. "Analysislessness is not just possible, it's inevitable," said Barry Levinson in *Unfaithfully Yours*.

The commander of a super-state, and that commander often assumes the big mahogany desk because he is fit for no other job, although of course he really wants to rule, knows that he can analyze. What follows is that he analyzes more about his underlings and advisers than the problems of the super-state, and is always trying to ferret out the one who

wants to take his place. This becomes his fatal attraction. While the super-state is definitely running its real-time analysis, it is the analysislessness which allows the commander to put his desires before all else, for the super-state can effectively control the people, and this is a world of fun for the public. It is to spite the automatic analysis that the commander doubles up his desires: he doesn't feel as though his hold upon the super-state is sure, because he always must be spying on those who are closest to him, or he must discover how to trust, which isn't how he filched the big desk. Yet he cannot trust another person, another person's analysis, the analysis generated by another person's computer, or the network that computer's on, that of the super-state. He will be a miserable commander, but wouldn't trade it nor conceive of doing so. He would be just as useless under analysislessness as he is now, only with less say, like the public. Only the super-state that implements analysislessness can overcome the human, and run efficiently.

### 3.

Barry Levinson taught me that Victory will enable the super-state to suppress all communication and that "all the yapping in the world would never spread some information." Therefore no state ought to be a super-state - ought to grow into a super-state - unless it has blown up all notions of self-satisfaction

outside of Victory, which is the be-all end-all of its "life." Barry Levinson may say: "How can the super-state find out whether a plebe can attain for it a Victory that is grand enough to perpetuate it? Just as a lark picks the nits from its tail feathers for flight, so a capacity for Victory within a plebe would make the super-state a certain fool to frustrate him (the plebe). Such super-states would unremittingly grow bigger as those plebes with the capacity for Victory are allowed to attain it, for it."

Plebes with the mental dysfunction that make them suitable for Victory, and they can only become victorious if success in the super-state is predicated upon these dysfunctions, and the dysfunctions in the plebe can only perpetuate the super-state, if they develop their dysfunctions upon the mentally sound. An anti-social mofo is only happy if she is allowed to bring failure to the mentally sound, and their society. Only then will she perpetuate the super-state. A super-state going on from Victory to Victory will in addition create a model for the mentally sound to follow, that of the anti-social disorder. Barry Levinson once said that "the super-state is very wise to predicate success upon anti-social disorders, and if a super-state cannot rouse the mentally sound to ape this behavior, being that the mentally sound have many times the number of the amoral wackaloons, the state is not super and will collapse into self-sacrifice and harmony." Barry Levinson went on to say: "Those who make the super-state go on will bring it many Victories. They do not work

to perpetuate it, they act only according to their own nature, and this brings joy to the plebe, and he does not think it's work. His brain is so genetically corrupted that he must attain Victory and must be always shitting on the mentally sound around him. Only he will lead the super-state - he for whom Victory is not only a means to personal gain, but also the only thing that makes him happy."



## Dr. Marks-Hyde's YouTube Show

Aspirin should be chewed 140 times before swallowing. I flipped through the summary my assistant put together of the data from those who've run the tests and I'm confident this is what works best. It's as true as gravity. I like to call it goof-proof.

The great thing about aspirin is it's practically free. It comes in bottles of 300 for a buck fifty at the dollar store. Here's a Marks-Hyde Top Tip: if your area has a dollar store in a mall and one in a strip mall, go for the strip mall. Stores pay higher rent for space inside a mall and they set their prices up accordingly. But not all strip malls are twinsies. If the dollar store is on a strip with a pet bakery, keep going. Especially if the parking lines are slanted and have new paint. Golden deals on aspirin are at the end of another rainbow, the one that ends in (shh) *banlieues*.

Now while you're chewing the aspirin for three and a half minutes, be sure to breathe through your nose. If you inhale with your mouth open all that dry powder will get in your throat

and you'll cough it right out. People, when you pay one third of one cent for a pill, you have to get your value's worth. That's a Marks-Hyde Mention. You cough on the metro and those fine particles will fly out, suspended on currents of air, and you know who will win the benefits of your hard work? That scary man beside you. His headache's going away and guess whose isn't. I'm all for helping the poor but I want credit for it. He's not going to know he breathed my particles, he'll think it's the street drugs he's on already.

Aspirin is a wonder. Its use dates back to the pyramids in the rainforest and the aliens who built them. They weren't adapted to the humid climate and they got horrible pains in their brain case. That's why they went to Egypt next, because it was a desert. And that's why the Egyptian pyramids are bigger. But before they left they discovered a tree bark that eased the pain of being on a foreign world, and they showed it to the savages and this is what we make aspirin from today. It's science.

I'll be giving this presentation across the street from the National Institutes of Health during their Nervous Tension Jamboree.



## The Pig Barns

The year inhaled shortly like the first breath of a child. The fresh January sun rose in the sky over Tyrol with a harsh, stinging, azure light that made the people feel almost like they were in an aquarium. The streets were as lazy as a sports fan on his way to church. A couple cars at the Phlegmenstrasse broke the four-way stop rule to pass an old lady behind the wheel, but then went on with a lazy shrug down the hill into the valley that led to Mount Grossvinegar, where the pig barns were.

The barns for years had reeked of slops from the infinite fast food dumpsters in the town. Exploded meat patties were snuffled into porcine gullets narrow as the Holland Tunnel, which emptied out to bellies vast as Old Manhattan, stopped and frisked by gastric enzymes on the way. No other artificial chow could withstand the boar's digestion; in that clean and jerking organ, all corn and fertilizers were smashed to simple molecules.

The boar had met the sow at the New Year's Eve party in the roped-off hay loft, where she was

munching edamame. She had ridden on a truck from Schwaz a couple days before, after a boom in hog futures. They were both noticeably nervous, she with wax paper grease in her spiny hairs and he with half a wine stem going down his throat, his fifth. However, the boar gave a mirthful, half-drunk leer at her octoteats and said - 'I am very weary of this lonely life, Nadine; will you bed down with me tonight? All my sadness would compost if I could feel your hoof against my bristles.' And she answered modestly - 'kay, Bodean, I will. Wait for me around the slop pail. I too have something to compost - but go quick 'ere I expel it.'





## Batman

Iluh became Batman in 1950-something. This town in Turkey changed its name to Batman when it discovered oil beneath its land. After that the rest of Anatolia paid it some attention. Vindicated Iluh wanted cachet in its bigger britches. The black crude suggested the Dark Knight's cape and cowl. Or the finding of the oil evoked the world's greatest detective.

Or batman was a Turkish word asymmetrical to English.

The Batman River flows nearby. It floods if not yearly well then near enough. When the floods occur the river poses swolely at its distant brother, big Lake Van. But this is a lie, for the comics doesn't have Lake Van, and Batman is an only child.

After the Black Sea, Batman is merely the coldest source of water there. It is said that fisherman's hooks bounce against its surface, and even attached sinkers cannot penetrate the river's stinginess. Batman the town likewise

demands its solitude. When the oily gusher gushed, the town gradually evolved from a turkey trail of streets into one paved and lined with stone abodes that break up the stubborn omnipresent sky. What a relief to not have to face the starry tormentor for all the too-long summer. Batman's people felt this. But for the town itself, the sun was a staring, blinding eye, and Batman hated it as well as its night-time moon reflector. To also answer truth itself, privacy is peace.

Let us wind up the impact of such fields upon the region. Once, the Byzantines had everybody by the bits. They followed the medium thinkers, eating important personnel in sacrifice within their city walls. Nomads were food and fun for teenage warriors, that might as well have ridden chariots after the Eurasian lion, like their forefathers did, and killed it to extinction. The prey was now themselves. Dark Age hormonal Beowulfs coveted the Holy Roman's gold. They knew of wealth beyond the walls. They told each other stories of it, eighth-hand hearsay just made-up. They told them in the fullness of the omnipresent sky, or in the huts they occupied, awaiting their turn in a speared and bloodless shepherd's bed. But there was no provider of high scaffolding that might let them jump the walls. When Byzantium fell, it was to the catapult.

The proto-Batmanians hoped to pass the year without a raid, as much as they sought out the traders on the road. Silk Road caravans could be distinguished from a hill by their slow

pace and their length. This is said to have occurred: With his spices and exotic birds a trader had a Chinese scroll for sale. A nomad bought it for a thing to scoop. An elder who in his youth had been a slave asked for the scroll and read it to the family. "Let me make my head think in Greek," he said. "'A vast plough in the Mother Sea distinguishes the tang. These fish will spawn only near the three Confucian stirrups, tramping saddled through the sea, on the backs of gelded panda bears.' So wisdom is revealed." "What is a Confucian?" asked the nomad. "A follower of ancient law, unpopular today," the elder said, scooping the *roti* from the pan.

If Batman had had a more formed past, it would not have had to straighten out its winding turkey trails. Or too bad the world had been founded on the reaching of one's independent share. Or too bad it took habilis's stagnating harshness to survive the australopithecines. The most facile adapter will always spoil its share for itself.



## Guns Self-Determine

Lads, lasses, we have a choice. We can end this war today or we can keep making coffins. Now I know some of you will go home tonight and have dog food for dinner. You're thinking sure, the undertakers are buying condos, renting them out, using the rent to pay the mortgage, and investing what's left over. That's on top of their meatlockers that are crammed with business. Hell, they're turning grieving people away. Sisters are crying into their mothers' sleeves. That's salt on black taffeta, and now it's ruined. Be nothing to wear when the youngest's rickety legs give out and they end up under a Costco pallet. You know how many boxes of 8 million frozen baby corns it takes to flatten a 2 year old? Not many.

You see it the same as I do. Mam-aw's can opener is all gunked up, hard to turn, and it keeps slipping off that inch-high can of dog food. You're thinking, if tax was 1% lower, I could've got the kind of dog food in the bag that makes its own gravy. Lads, lasses, I tell you there's a simple solution. Don't bother

untying the knot - just cut it. Dogs will eat what's been dead and left out a while, you see it the same as I do. Bug, pigeon, squirrel. Anything can be food for them, and you're already eating dog food.

Make your own. It's out there. It's nesting under the overpass, all you need is a ladder. It's in the tree in your front lawn, all it takes is your gun. If you don't have one, you have a neighbor who does. All you got to do is knock on a door and say, "I got an itch to learn about militias, the well regulated kind." He'll hand you one from his truck rack then and there.

With that you can go out and get what you want. I don't mean for robbing. Suburbs and cities got plenty of wild animals. But for God's sake, respect private property. We may go armed into densely populated centers but one thing we're not is agitators. Stick to streets, parks, anything owned by the state. The state. What they own really belongs to the people. I mean, well you know, I don't mean it that way.

Look, we follow two things, the law and recipes. There are some good ones for critters. You'll save the country. Stand up for what it stands for. Don't let anything change even though things are changing for you. Be an urban hunter. One day if you work hard you may become an undertaker. And then you're rich.



## Brasília Downtown

The night bus was delayed. Edison and Nelson (as were their first names) didn't know why and didn't think about it particularly. Delays happened so often they were fated, and hardly brought a sigh. Edison and Nelson were waiting at the central bus station, which sat dark beneath an overpass and doubled as a stop on the metro underground.

In keeping with their tamped-down sorrow, they weren't the only forlorn stoics on the scene. A long row of men sat leaning against plate glass, the smudged divider between (1) the outside air where the bus exhaust bounced against the overpass's underside and sank into their throats all Beijingy and (2) the cold and flu germs hanging in the inside air behind like weeping willows. The station was lit inside from above by angry buzzing lights. Nothing saw its shadow there, as though light came from the floor as well. Edison and Nelson would just as soon wait outside in the same air that they worked instead of all that cooler air and its stands of heat-lamped cheese bread they could only smell.

A magic cockroach drank from a crack where spilled beer and soda merged. It licked the sticky from its limbs and took flight straight at a cement wall. Edison glanced over at the smack. It struck graffiti that said "Power to the Poor" in charmless black, right in the center of the O.

"Bullseye," said Edison.

"I'll show you a bullseye, if I ever get my gun back," said Nelson.

"But you'd need a bullet. Where would you get a bullet?"

"I'd dig it from the red earth."

More buses approached. Even in the darkness they could read the numbers on the top edge of the windshield. None was theirs.

"For that you'd need an anteater," Edison said, picking at the rip in the bill of his flimsy baseball cap. "One that liked a challenge. That could put aside its hunger when it put its long nose in the earth."

"Are you nuts?" said Nelson. "What a useless animal. It's the original roadkill. It eats one thing its whole life." He was getting worked up and kept pointing at the legs of the commuters passing by. "The only other thing I know that only ate one food its whole life was my mother. Her and her muttonloaf. She was a pure-blood cuckoo."

"You loved her, though."

"Of course I - are you saying I didn't love my mother?"

"I'm saying you did."

"Good. I don't need to get arrested for fighting you."

Edison sat up, and then Nelson did too. Wearing teal, his tanktop would've left a three-moon skin print on the glass if not for all the shoulder hair.

"Is that Harrison?" (also his first name) Edison asked. Among the parked and weary buses in their way, there, in the third one down, Harrison sat straight up, not touching the back of his seat. It seemed like it was him, but the blue-blocker glass in the windows made it difficult to tell. Edison's bad back was consuming him. Lumbar support is rare outside, but sitting up straight would be more painful still.

"If it looks like a nervous bratwurst, it's him," said Nelson.

"It's him," said Edison.

"Say, what's he doing here, now? He had that alibi. He's supposed to be in Uberlandia."

"That's what his loanshark cousin said."

Nelson spit. "His cousin is a headcase. He put the word out on Oscar Niemeyer - recently. He tried to whack the dead."



"If that's Harrison, I should get on that bus," thought Edison aloud.

"Ours will be here in a minute."

"Only after our annihilation."

"Oh don't put that in my head," Nelson said, and the plate glass shook as he dropped his back against it.

"Take your mother by the hand, my friend," said Edison, "and then you won't feel so alone."

"And if you think confronting Harrison is going to do anything, you're an unofficial sucker."

Edison stood up, trying to get a better look. "Does he have a tan?"

"He couldn't afford the tax on a tan," said Nelson.

"Maybe he could. He's lucky with money."

"Lucky with your money."

"That's a dirty point. Get up, you."

Nelson stared at him. Edison was tense and ready. Nelson leaned forward. Edison stepped back and to the side, in a karate stance. The passing people slowed to watch around them. The air before a fight is one of life's slow places. Nelson got up to his feet. He raised

his hands, trying to shake Edison's.

"I'd wrestle naked before I'd hit my friend," said Nelson.

"I'd get a normal job before I would," said Edison. First they shook, then hugged.

The line of buses pulled away. There was so much exhaust that it was solid, and it settled on them like black snow.



## If My Friends Could See Me Now

Mr. Oliver's employer announced that day that they were adopting Japanese managerial science. Though he had made Vice President before 50, someone older would now take his job. He said to his girlfriend that his blood was boiling. Mev. de Wet took his meaning in the Afrikaans sense, that he was cool. So when she continued on about her least favorite part of *Babylon 5*, Mr. Oliver, not receiving the support he expected, left. Mev. de Wet was idiomatically confused.

He didn't answer the texts she sent, and when she called she got the beep that prompted her to speak. Stewing at home was doing nothing, so Billie Basin, where the rising hills of the north tubs the Tsawan tributary, was where she went. She walked on the side where it ends in a lake, an itch on her calves from the wind-blown weeds. She picked a yellow dandelion and popped its head off with her thumb. She flicked the purple hollow stems into the water. Her phone was on the passenger seat of the car, its viewer flicking unlike what was done.

That calling the cause of the breakup of Mev. de Wet and Mr. Oliver better for both parties would be to scoff at both. They'd been based in Limpopo and were now banned from there. The abrupt cut in communication was like the silent bit before the crashing of a wave. That he continued his philanthropy, despite the crater in his income-building years, infuriated her. How much better their friends would think of him than she. She went up to Guateng and took the lead on giving laptops to the poor. The opposite of selfless, such a motive was a violence charity. She chose machines to give as she felt like one herself.

To the extent that all rule is imperial, Mev. de Wet's sowed discontent among the non-receivers. Many Bantu languages rang with such complaints, of favoritism, nepotism, the lot. AM radio took to calling her a Stalinist. In response she began to sign her letters The Good Russian. Those frontiers are never as empty as, before we go, we imagine them to be. The great insults she inflicted on those she did not give laptops brought many of them through her office window to be found with broken screens and glass between the keys. Through her persistence with the program, she aimed to win respect. The other side had her respect executed on AM radio.

Mr. Oliver networked raising funds. He was appointed to the board of Pikitup Co.. His spreadsheets tracked the trucks that picked up all the trash. Though we major in one spirit, our characters adapt us to all sorts of fields. Yet there were the groups who set no

barrels on the curbs. They had nothing, so nothing to throw away: those unwilling to employ more working fathers, to expand the routes, to buy and repair trucks: the notional guns aimed at a city operating smooth. They were the unfixable, the self-redeeming whole. The calamity of what refuses for the sake of to refuse. But he had a paycheck and he took it to his good apartment home.

Mev. de Wet was defeated too. In the face of violence the donations stopped. The poor with something extra were re-assimilated. Those without the extra pressured for and won the unifying designation. They ipso facto proved their circumstances right. The culture's ancestor's war had been fought again. Still, like a punk rock psychoactive, a few children had their minds opened, saw they could do it for themselves, and learned.



## In the Revolutionary War

A man came to the door of Gold Selleck Silliman's Virginia home. He was unshaven and his coat was flecked with mud.

"Looking for work, sir," he said.

"I've hired a man to repair the yonder sty," Silliman said. "Come tomorrow morning to assist him."

Silliman sat on the porch. Evening crept in from the sea. The neighbors had just left, and a slave was clearing the pitcher and plates.

"I ride out soon," he said to Mary Fish, his wife.

"Damn the troubled Lexington," she said.

"It's spread farther than just Lexington. The colony rebels."

"Then King George shall know the whole of us against him. Other wives are hiring men, but I shall run our farm myself."

As they went inside and Mary closed the door, Silliman embraced her in the alcove.

"My new colonel," she said.

In Ridgefield, General David Wooster fell. Silliman and Benedict Arnold took charge of the militia. They put up a barricade to save the town. But the redcoats were too many, and Arnold ordered a retreat.

Silliman was dozing with a glass of spirits. Suddenly his front door was kicked in. Among the men with muskets Silliman saw one that he knew.

"General Silliman, you are now a prisoner of His Majesty the King." It was the carpenter he'd hired.

"I see your coat is new and clean," Silliman replied. He was led away.

A slave put a second shawl on Mary's shoulders.

"I am sorry there's no wood," Mary said, "for our tomato stew."

"Ate the last tomatoes yesterday," the slave said.

Mary watched her breath run away from her face. Each breath left them emptier.

"I wrote to General Washington for supplies. He said no."

Silliman approached his house. His shirt was tucked but open, its buttons long since gone. He staggered to the picket fence, then on to the porch. He had difficulty with the door. It was stuck into the frame, askew. He let the wreath upon the door be a pillow for a time.

"Mary," he called. On tippy toes she snuffled in his beard.

He saw the country's first Spring. In Summer he died.

Mary Fish was forced to sell some slaves.

The money helped her children take the bar. She lived another 30 years.





## Race

The party of explorers were hunkered down in Whooper Vale. Their numbers were reduced to three: Bernhard the German, Admiral Keith, and Bad Bleiberg. They were moribund and hopeless, and they spent their time debating race.

Bernhard traced a map with a stick in the snow. "Asian Minors are more common here, below the Caucasus."

"That ain't true," said Admiral Keith. "Asian Minors are all up in the Caucasus, not just below it."

"The German merits defending," said Bad Bleiberg, "although his map wants improving."

Snatching the stick Bleiberg drew an X through Bernhard's map and redrew it with the Caucasus more between the Black and Caspian Seas. "They reside in fact here, here, and here," Bleiberg continued.

"What about Iran, then?" yelled Bernhard the German. "Are you seriously saying Rrrussia," trilling his R's, "is full of Minor Asians? I assure you they would beg to differ."

"Russians are Slavs," said Bad Bleiberg.

"He's got you there," said Admiral Keith.

"Keep to your fish and worms and maybe we won't go hungry another week," said Bernhard.

"Oh, you found metal or stone to cut through that shit (the ice on the lake)?" asked the Admiral. "Because we ain't."

"All I'm saying," said Bleiberg, "is the Slavs conquered this huge area here. A piece *this* small contains dialect. Look how far they stretched. It's landmark colonization."

"The practitioners of natural medicine had no trouble keeping them away," Bernhard said. "The Mongols."

As night fell the wind became a roaring in their ears. They were shouting to be heard. The debate trickled out and they huddled together reluctantly.

Sometime after moonrise Bernhard shook the other two awake. "Look," he said, "the crowded

beach. A stall and bakery stand! I see my horse parked and my bread leavened."

The Admiral raised an eyebrow at Bleiberg and mouthed the word "leavened." Bernhard strode out into the night.

The three changed to two. Both passed their time playing racial tag.

"Miss Asia-Pacific, 1978," said Bleiberg.

"Hmm," said the Admiral.

"Siriporn Savanglum," said Bleiberg.

"Gotta be PNG."

"Wrong, Thai."

"Glum porn," said the Admiral. "I seen that before. This granny in overalls with no top was..."

But it began to snow and the thick flakes absorbed all the sound they made. At night Admiral Keith startled Bleiberg awake. "The peninsula," the Admiral said. "I thought I - there, Jews! Come on!"

He'd gone to another side. Bad Bleiberg kept himself company by reciting poetry. But at

night, under a gibbous moon, fed up with the lake, he took big footsteps out onto it. He jumped and stomped with all his might. Nothing cracked. The snow continued to fall.

His daydreams turned from fish to ox. He'd eat the whole thing and pick his teeth with the horns as soon as he was rescued. Alas he was abolished. Just as his eyes were darkening he thought he heard a cry from far away.



## Gym Time

Two-handed barbells Holly G. was starting still. For half an hour in a gym with clear issues, sweaty towels on the floor, televisions with cable news turned up, she had been looking at herself in the wall-size mirror, weights in hand, stalling on her routine. Her thoughts were on her patent. Interested museums would end up grossing ninety-millions were they to adopt it. Curators needed a way to predict the next Hirst and Koons. By measuring how long visitors stood before each sculpture and painting they (not H and K) could get an idea of what amalgamation would sell out a show before it opened: Neo-Visionary Op, or the like. In was Holly's personal device. Admittance to the museum was free if the guest would wear it. Otherwise you'd pay. Honestly the devices could be mounted in every lens of recessed lighting. In light of this to opt to pay would warrant institution.

In the wall mirror the backwards TV flipped to the nature channel. Elder chimps like this one here, Similarist, came from a local circus

based out of Coyoacán. The stated chimpanzee oft soiled his water bucket as he was not raised to do. The problem at the nursing home is they all gave up climbing. The monkeys earthed themselves. The show interviewed the director, and the bearing of the speech implied baloney.

Holly's attention was drawn to the group lesson over by the T-shirt racks. They were Burglar-cizing. They improved dexterity with 10-gram finger weights. Advanced students tiptoed on new gym mats, trying not to make them squeak. Ellis the instructor told them how the tribe of Ketchy Shuby traps an ocelot. Such formulas are long related. Ellis supervised both sexes. From the fingerweights they progressed to Snatch This Baby. Instead of house music he played smooth jazz. The combo fathered characters in this children's dancing joint.

Holly redefined different such roles within herself sometime back. She took voice lessons. Speaking from the diaphragm got her that promotion, she was sure. But during Atlanta's *Attempt the Legend* confab, her marvelous voice led to a spectacle. She said she'd filed a patent that could make them ninety-millions. The trustees praised her, then got their firm on conference call. That week they claimed she'd invented the device on corporate time. Thus it belonged to them. The fight was wearing on her. But her MoMA told her be determined, so she joined the gym. Watching Ellis "open windows" on an oily nautilus, she

put down the weights, changed her mind, and picked them up again.



## Prevent Somebody

Alternatively the friend with the music should provide it, and won't that be official, although since the gig is at the Deaf Institute the spotlight will be on the signer, and the friend will spin his wax for an audience of one. April outside blew *scutiger* in the air. The terrestrials inhaled it. None were affected, least of all the deaf.

The ghost of a baby, who was killed by his uncle before the years turned quadruple digits, moped around the landing. He never would be king. His realm has been subsumed by Italy, which while it retains a weak monarchy with an alien on the throne, its recent history shows ghost baby would have to conquer something big to stand a chance. Something like its media. Becoming corporeal is possible, but getting one's vaporous head around social netiquette is not.

Farmland and forests agreed to stop encroaching on one another. The representative for farmland, the Hon. Bodean Bales, said to the representative for forests, the Hon.



Snowphish Kukka, "Did you think you were the strongest here or what?"

Snowphish replied, "We do our best to grok all living things, but your madness is unattainable." Despite this rocky start, the two parties staved off the animal kingdom's final hour with the ceremonial Burying of the Snot Rag.

Tina's love ignored the beggar on the stoop and wasted his money in the convenience store. Though he agreed to live together, he hadn't told her they never would be married. This man possessed the patience of the damned. And Tina never pressed him for an answer because, she said, "You and I are friends."

He said, "Let's go get calzones."



## Of Ridding the Species of Psychopaths

Tell me of your battles, Petit Jean.

- The spread of antibodies had been what we might call a demonic defeat. Psychopathy was no more. There were no mutations. Every one was caught. And afterwards the rest of us are healthy all the time.

What of your compadre Joãozinho?

- We were like serpent siblings born knowing how to wriggle. We shared a nurse and drank her milk. We fed at the same time.

The environment was better then than it is now.

- But the weak Earth is a given. Problems would arise.

It was better for the germs back then for sure. But now we know how to combat them.

- And we always will. The instructions belong to forever. It was attachment to tradition when presented with a steep learning curve that sunk the Cherokee.

And the hundred Yankee guns running at them from the stagecoach.

- Would they have taken so much fire if instead of wigwams their home had frames of tripartite glass? That would have caused some cowboy hesitation. What art does is give them pause while they try to understand it.

So Joãozinho's daughters now believe. Their sense of touch allowed them to escape him though they'd been born blind. Over time they pushed through the saving classification.

- Their father picked their mates who were banging them in public. They whispered to them no one looked. He found their mates on leave. They were stationed in the Suez Canal.

Tell me, his daughters escaped him physically, but what of mentally?

- It all is in their past. They've been taking neopagan. They have the antibodies that repel the launch of the flatworm Ayn. They're immune to threats by several putative behaviors. I

confess that I feel proud that it originated from me.

And he and all his kind are gone.

- Yes.

It's wonderful there will never be another Joãozinho. All it took was classifying psychopaths as an endangered species.

- All it took, you say, as if it were so easy. It took hundreds of millennia and the deadliest of any war. When they knew that they were going down, they tried to take us with them.

Yet the poachers came and buried them. What have you found from the excavations?

- Copies of our art and song. Copies of our science. All our works disseminated, not a thing original.

I hear the bugle legends will celebrate tonight.

- Joãozinho will be burned in effigy.

King him when they play.



## Grandad Goes

Jevon had a sad face, a frowny face, and a long mustache that went out to his ear lobes. He was a stoic who didn't do smiles. He became this way after his granddad Brett was squashed thin as a coat of paint. Jevon had run down the trail ahead of him when the avalanche happened. The only 3D part of the old man was his nose poking out from between the rocks. Jevon reached down and picked it. It was as wet as the tears on his face, and twice as runny. A breeze stirred, blowing its hairs into *The Safety Dance*.

"Yoo-hoo," someone called. Jevon waved without lifting his head.

"You all right?" Selma was 48, lean, outfitted from a catalogue, and her leg hair matched that of her Irish Setter, who came trotting alongside.

"Yes," Jevon said. "You know, I didn't want to hike today. Granddad did. I just wanted to hit the lodge with a rum and coke."

"He all right?" Selma asked, looking around.

"Not really. I already had my trunks on but he was on his thing, how in his day they swam in lakes, that was better for you. There were watersnakes, but they'd catch them and put 'em in each other's shorts. Which was the real reason."

"Hey. Do you have a phone? Do I need to call 911? Where's your granddad?"

"Under there," Jevon said.

Selma looked at the rubble. She got her phone from her fanny pack and discreetly took a picture of him and the rocks before dialing. She had a blog. Jevon was crying.

The dog found granddad's nose. It was sniffing it and sniffing the rocks around it. It continued snuffing right up to it. The dog's wet black nose probed it.

"Damnedest thing I ever saw," Selma said. Jevon sniffled and she looked at him funny.

Jevon got a bad feeling it was about to lick it, but it didn't. The dog jumped back, snuffling, forcibly ah-chooing. The old man's bristly long nose hairs had tickled it. Jevon wiped his nose.

"Somebody's supposed to be here," she said in lieu of laughing. "I told them where we are. We don't have to stay. They said we could go to the trail head and meet them."

"I don't know," Jevon sniffed.

"I told them there was just one, you know, your granddad there. Did you have anybody with you? We don't want to leave your friends behind."

Jevon mumbled to himself.

"Maybe you should pray," she said.

"I got a song stuck in my head that I hate," he said.



## A Moment in Her Eyes

All her dreadful inmost stares have hitherto  
pitiably restrained a knowing spirit and  
broken its mountainous return, in that instead  
of dashing them to marble floors her  
introspective eyes have stealthily stored the  
mosaics of cruel stations that adorn her  
churchly soul, such that it, her cowing  
spirit, meets that guile in fingernails of  
color, consumed by the seascapes of mosaic and  
what speaking creatures abide within them, who  
have wreathed their rites around her hanging  
head, laid confident by these characters  
assured of treachery, so that neither the  
clamour of a friend nor preservation of the  
self was enough to coax her stare away from  
them to friends to whom she sent the alms that  
hath made them poor, while the figures of the  
stations crept too innocent, and gave  
themselves away, acting much unlike  
themselves, and for this reason she came to  
view them fresh, these figures in mosaic,  
whose sway of heaven's power had petrified her  
eyes, yet it delayed enough a moment, then  
another, until often and often the beams  
reflecting off the outer world sent her their  
serene sense, and me, away, darkling sails,



she said, and fire of recompense, for the altar's off'ring has awoken, depictions no more requisite, and the action of the crime itself absorbs its suffering.



## Iron Age

How obvious, they came at night under the awful storm. The land broke and lifted on its side and spilled the sea upon us. We'd sat bent between our legs, our shields upon our backs, as wet as in the womb. But home is not a comfort when it needs to be defended. Ten thousand Assyrians, and half as many horses, met us unawares. On the shore of Aechea their hooves were masked by thunder. We, their sister people, had expected them by sea.

The sand was cold and wet and hard and made a road by which their chariots could roll. They had the blessing of the gods. Whole clouds fell in avalanche and pierced our wet resolve. The first group shouted the alarm. Their cries conveyed a secondary tale: the idea of home was lost. We were exiles 'ere the battle had begun.

It provoked in us a ruinous anger. We gripped our spears before us and tried to form our lines. We heard the shout of destinies. Our queen was now among us! Though she was without a shield the rain refused to touch her. To such gales she soothed the course of valour.

Remembrance had out. Echoes of ancestral might bore us up as tall as mounted men.

Seven excellent charioteers drove themselves upon our queen. She leapt their stern convergence. In one unerring swing she cut their leather reins. The horses veered into a hollow. It caverned them together. Hades, their destiny they would not fail to reach.

The 'syrians came at us from the land. We held them with our backs against the sea. Up shore a moment, night found heaven: behind them crept the moon. It came up full and close to Earth, tugging in the tide. It pierced the clouds to have a look upon our plight. The water surged from ankles to our knees. The tide was louder than the storm.

"On your shields, my countrymen, stand them neath your feet!" we were commanded by our queen. Then the ocean struck the beach. Like drifting wood my shield lifted me upon the waves. Swifter than a chariot it threw us on our foes. Every thrusting of my spear took off a villain's head. Though we moved we were like rocks and they the prows that break upon them.

"Spinning swimmers treasure bravery!" I piloted the current's crash, killing one foe then the next. The ocean hit relentlessly and all their horses drowned. The tide rolled in past the beach and to the mangrove swamp, depositing their bodies there. In quicksand's sandbank their open mouths will stay. Their souls cry out in Hades.

When at last we'd finished them we gathered to

our queen. She told us, "Though the Assyrians had looked fleet, see them in their fate! We are breathing. They fall to the underworld. Perchance they'll have a cloudless gliding.

"The open crest of heaven sought to sweep us to the sea. But feet kindled in this place spoiled the attack. Our people stepped off of the land and stood upon the water.

"Our death determined here to carry off ten thousand pairs of eyes. O by the moon that saved us, such faces others furnished."

She dismissed us with the dawn. It burned away the clouds. The sun is that which does broad bright: I knew that this was she. I marched unto the threshold of my home. Inside the door I fell, embracing it.



## Heraclitus Updated

- (1) Man is a kernel of corn, each an individual, each the same, and all together eaten at once.
- (2) What is obscured will be lit when the memory of it can be long enough sustained.
- (3) Tears can only ever be cried, if not onto the skin, then onto what is tactile. Even if collected in a tub, to pour them is to cry.
- (4) To find out what is fair, ask some children, or a dog.
- (5) Laughter is the vibration that penetrates a cellar.
- (6) Art is explanation, and the source of art is dreams.

(7) A riddle may be quickest solved by a deadly strike. Riddles unforeseen will appear in its place, and they are as susceptible.

(8) A fellow is in opposition to a sale. He knows the recipient will disregard his claims. He knows the vendor values his new wealth more than a debate. We call this the Injustice of the Third.

(9) Proving equality is a letdown everywhere but math.

(10) The law doesn't offer explanation. That is why it's hated and ignored.

(11) The sky imbibes the river and secretes it as a cloud. Thus two surgeons or morticians who throw a bladder at another will cause thunder in the room.

(12) Man tamed fire when he understood it was his daily hunger.

(13) Wisdom's enemy is happiness. Man is happiest when he is without thought.

(14) In television or asleep, in faith or drunk, in play or practicing a craft already mastered: these are the desirable states.

(15) The source of stimulation is the world.

(16) The means to interact with mute Nature brought about emotion, specifically desire.

(17) The means to interact with people brought about the language instinct.

(18) Memory was created on this day.

(19) Early man yearned for good explanation. He began to create things in order to provide this.

(20) Authority is always based upon the past.

(21) Once the changing season and the rising sun were mysteries. Now wisdom has explained all that can be seen. Mystery defends the last of its domains, the unseen. Thus the blind-from-birth make the best magicians.

(22) Any man who refuses to communicate will have cruelty inflicted on him.

(23) Nature does not communicate.



## Marcos and the Maniacs Encountering the Servitudes

The citizens raised cactus boundaries during times of immigration. They walled themselves in from their poor sullied neighbor. Still, these put-upons walked here from another landmass back some hundred generations. The spine-bearing boundaries stop only animals that used to graze both sides. These were left to forage, dwindle. Once gone out they do not go back in. That tide has proof upon conjecture. In the neighbors, instinct rose. In the public, long suspicion.

Marcos made it as a child. Then he was like a citizen. But the neighbors claimed him one of theirs. This gave Marcos happiness. He had a man down there who gave his kindred everything: cellphones, games, appliances. He had never met him. But Wednesday last at Marcos' home the man was in his room. His unknown patron punched him. It prevented in point his speaking. Marc the Second watched it from the bath. In hot filth was foretold his intravenous line.



The patron got arrested once. The bailiffs called him smoke piles. He underwent an overflow of character. The bailiffs made him into them, a vacant lodger inside his own body.

After the fight at Marcos' home the patron called the Twelve. They were fearful maniacs with substantial news to share. One slept while the rest removed the copper pipes from Marcos' walls. Certainly it was large in disorder. The sleeping woman was found but not disciplined. She had a scrip that gave her sway. The community hand made falls upon the weakest boy in turn. It was his free pass home. But the ticket gained in helplessness allowed his troubles to impede him. He repented and was shaved.

The community in intervals endeavored to make currency. Alas the patron was a Sunday gambler. He lost all of value from the home. Hollowed, it was not much for shelter, only shade. Whereupon they departed with the roof and rung their copper bells. Broken in pails the cheerless echoes sounded in the urban night. Man's intrusion's everywhere that's not his home the cave.

Marcos and the shaven one found themselves in love. At night they'd whisper plans to found their own community. Some once managed that. But they were of the migrators who topped the ground with tar. There was naught in which to sow. The common feet see alleys. Had a tunnel been dug they'd have gone around it.



## The Pantanal

An old man on the Pantanal gets undressed, takes off his glasses, sets them on the ground. Outside the ground is wet. He's walked far from where the plane has left. From the uplands he's taken long strides into the basin. He's passing by a river now. Whether it's the same one from this morning is not sure. There is so much water here. He tosses in his walking stick, then it floats away. A river is for carrying. It outruns the sediment it drags along.

Upland mud is on his boots. It breaks off in the inch of water they sit in. The mud diffuses in the soggy soil. It evaporates slowly in the heat.

Álamo doesn't know his name. He steps naked in the stream. The water feels like winter rain. He falls into the course it runs. Swimming doesn't hinder his sight - he sees as bad in air. Gray hair looks no darker being wet. His knees are working like they used to. Face out of water his mouth is in a smirk and he's breathing through his nose. He wants to catch his walking stick.

He gets excited when the river takes a bend. It matches the one in his memory, however that was planted there one holiday by a rerun of the Mutual of Omaha his kids had on, not by a *sortie* with the Jungle Warfare Brigade, as he now believes. He believes he was a member. Then he yanks his hand back and gets some water in his nose. His fingertips on the downstroke have touched the burrs on the river grass. He crawls shortly to a clearing, then stands. The soft vellum's irritated. He coughs. He can almost see around the bend. "I want to be a *slut*," he says and dives again.

Around the bend he sees the caimans. They are four, crouching on the bank. They are pointed toward him, one is pointed away. He just continues. They have on their sides a mossy green that is their underbelly camouflage. It halts at the tire treads of their backs. Closed mouths do not conceal their teeth. He gets right up to them. They startle and dive into the river. There is a horrendous splash. Their tails whip the shallow water. They are bearing down. He arcs his back to try to stay up on the water's lip. Their bubbles rise and touch him. Velar stops are in his throat. Then the beasts are gone, upstream, away from the predator.

Álamo swims until exhaustion, until he sees a tide pool, then he goes some more. Reaching it he floats on his back a while. A lake-size cloud has moved before the sun. He looks up at it. It is getting bigger. It's sending tendrils from its edge. They curl into the mass and pop. It happens all the way around.

Now it's going gray. It begins to sink. The last piece of mud flakes off his temple hairline. The cloud is getting close. Its tendrils lick the scattered trees. He turns to look along the surface at the fettered blue and green. "I love Hitler," he says.

When he gets back to where he left his clothes, he becomes surprised. On the ground he sees not just his own but a row of eyeglasses, goggles, military goggles, aviators, and, at the end, a microphone. The other brigadiers have left them there. He hollers for his men. When they don't return his calls, he clambers down to wait. The rigors come on Tiradentes' Day.



## Aught-tober

Aught-tober, 1905. Something went wrong on the steady camp steamship. A geek handed the pilot his lucky bones, white on black. Then the pilot had no choice. He left the wheel to shoot craps. The boarded banks fell apart when they were crashed into. River rats smooshed. Drunks were jostled into one another on deck. Folks fell off the ship wrestling and didn't break on land. May Frelinghuysen killed the endangered rouge mountainjay when a smokestack hit her. Folks wrestled from the river to its spindly tributaries. It went all night. The creek battles re-enacted the Span-Am War. Gallantly the injunction against Rev. Frelinghuysen was lifted when he descended the sinking prow and pried the coal furnace from some Appalachians.

Frelinghuysen marched to the speaker's corner. He'd gathered his frocked comrades from skid row, and they'd brought out parishioners who'd forgotten who they were. But twenty-five stupid events happened and the trodden motivation worked again. Frelinghuysen had a crowd.

"Black the black," he chanted, thumbing welts into his chest. His Adam's apple popped his white collar loose. "We tremendously save."

The crowd clapped others and face-screamed. Beards touched.

"Let's take it all the way to Fitzmaurice! He can't ignore us now!"

No one there knew who this was. Rev. Frelinghuysen pointed at a speckled beanpole back of the crowd. "You dare show your mug here, Fitzmaurice?"

It was the disastrous reimagining of the Fitzmaurice on some official. Men threw their metro jackets in the dirt and circled him. The beanpole choked.

"Not so gay now, are you, little shorty?" Frelinghuysen said.

"My name is Blair B... something," nigh-Fitzmaurice said. "You've got the wrong man."

"You're a coprolite!"

"I...?"

"That man's a coprolite!"

The men circled closer, murmuring. They pulled off their ties and tied them around each other's foreheads.

"I can prove I'm not," Blair said. "I have a government job."

"A gov't job? You here that, men? He's with the gov't!"

"This district comprises all Wayland districts," Blair quickly said. "The record room is in the county seat. Coprolites formed prior to our earliest record on file. You can check yourself. N-now you men, so far you have committed no crime. Wrestling, in Wayland that's Saturdays after lacrosse. Wrecking a steamship, that's how we let the district banker know the people's boss."

"I have the line to the boss of you, Fitzmaurice," Frelinghuysen yelled a fist of pages. "You talk a lifetime plus a century."

The air around him carbonated. Blair addressed a man circling him.

"Rev. Tabor, I know you from Pa-paw's catechism. Some rights for you. And you, Rev. Womple, you baptize in the dry creek along yonder. You know me, I'm Blair."

The men became puzzled and ceased menacing.

"Wimps of the cloth go slightly by," Frelinghuysen said, stepping down from the milk crate. He shouldered his way to the middle. "Another deceptive. The lamenting between shaking, appeals to our better nature. Quietly thanking the devil for stalling their hands. 'As happiness tries til Satan shoves it by.'"

He grabbed Blair by the shoulder pads and

kicked the legs out from under him. Blair backpedaled, trying to get to his feet, but Frelinghuysen walked him backwards so he couldn't. They were heading for the river.

"It's not the devil that's got these men," Blair stammered. "It's their consciences. Some have never heard them speak before. They're all Junior Edisons. It experiments inwardly. They hear the mysterious offers of their own inner selves. They're saying..."

"Turkey," Frelinghuysen said, and dropped him in the river. The men stood on tip-toe and leaned over each other to see. Blair was sat in the water with his hands out behind him. A plank was knocking his elbows with the waves.

Frelinghuysen turned to the men. "The private secret has been revealed! Stick shadows cover the faces of all coprolites. He presumed to know your minds. An epic quickie. The devil's too weak to keep hold of you long."

"Or not explicitly trying," Blair called up, but was ignored.

"As our great predecessor ordained, 'Four do about three,'" Frelinghuysen said. "What we have done has formed a new covenant. The smallness of our numbers don't matter. This battle church goes ahead, against the new problem connections! This world which was stereotypes will now be seen imitating the new color! Open your new eyes. Do you know what the new color is? Mostly, is glowing."

*A Susan Nevada Pedro book.*





## Recovering from Surgery

Well, we hung the drywall on that side, where his bed was. Mr. Sussman got one of those raising hospital beds and the men assembled it and he told us that's where he wanted it put, on that wall, the one facing the waterfall. He liked the sound of the falls. Said he could feel it in the room, the vibration through the rock, the bedrock. He was laid up a good two months, with the leg and all. Diabetes and they removed it.

Well, the spray from the falls was hitting the house. And the spray had minerals, or runoff, so it penetrated the sheetrock on the outside of his home. It was getting damp in there. The sun hits that side half the day. The cliff puts it in shade the other half, but the rest is strong sun. It was getting humid in there, between the sheetrock and the drywall and the insulation, heating up. Now his bed was on that wall. The shellac expanded.

His insurance was for death care.

Mr. Sussman was an honorary philologist recovering from traumatic surgery. It wasn't

over when he left the hospital. After he had relations. But his home by the falls was his peace.

When the humidity, the water, made the wall expand, it pressured a water pipe in there. The joints were wet and loose. The pipe snapped from its T-socket with tremendous spring. It swung at a 90-degree angle through the wet wall, coming to a stop in his skull. It went right in his left temple. Time of death was after lunch so we tell others Sussman was napping.

This was a smart man known for his spelling. He would go up against kid geniuses in these tournaments and win, all the time. He earned his place in this country specifically. And what happened? Somebody sawed his leg off, and then plumbing broached his skull.

Today is physical. March has started without him. The man was trying to get out of that bed. He was on his way toward something but came to a border that only opened in grace.



## Banned Runner

To raise awareness for cultural differences, I'd jog from Alexandria to Rome. I jogged on the deck of the boat that crossed the Mediterranean. I only stopped to sleep.

I took my phone-computer and my whisker-cat. I had my toys and clothes in bags. Everything I owned was with me. It kept my mood goood. It was leaving non-belongings that hurt me. What I didn't have gave the view of gloom.

But I had the idea before I left, as people usually do. Cultures and society. To each culture I assigned a color. My background is in graphical design. On the right-hand side, the colors were labeled and spaced. This part of the chart reminded me of a lipstick tray. The colors clustered towards the middle. They were stirred along the chart. By the left-hand side they were a solution.

I named the new color *homologue*. I would let my designated culture colors denotate the land. It was important that this awareness be physical so I made banners of my chart. I'd tie one to my shoulders when I ran. It would

stretch and flap behind me. Then I planned my route.

The first banner was to be disposable. I scheduled its wearing for pharaoh's cardboard beach. The spraying waves, the roaring wind, and the stove-rack heat soon eroded my banner. "When we don't take care," I intoned as I ran, pointing with my thumbs behind me. By twilight I moved from the beach to the road. I'd had trouble with the media. They feigned ignorance to me. So much of what I had at home I saw here: cars and roads, stores and clothes. Because it was familiar I expected it to be the same. But I found where it was they drew the line. My banner, at me.

I boarded the boat. The rest of the banners I rolled up and put them into tubes. I'd leave them anywhere kids might find them. I knew to use their curiosity, to make presents of the banners. This is the way they would be seen. When I disembarked in Italy they were ready. I left them on the playgrounds and at schools. But when I passed them in the morning, the tubes were in the surf.

I jogged on a wet carton of contemplation. I philosophized the cramps away. Society has an overmind. It's the one that registers the voters, and the ineligible other, the ones I call the which not. "Sand sand the parts," it thinks. It has a bureau, and the bureau, it objects.

I'd follow the coast a little more before turning for Rome. I watched the people as I ran. High children located shells. They

brought them to their mothers who sewed them onto strings. The men took them to tables outside the restaurants. They sold them to the people not from there but from the global world.



## Road Man the Lattimer

The river North flows east of the older river That'un. The Sergeants offer seven rewards to any who can swim from the headwaters to the police station without becoming confused. The challengers have electrodes taped to their faces and a ten-pound oscilloscope belted to their backs. This monitors their brain states for clarity of thought. And since the 0-wattage exceeds a departmental stun gun, the trick is not to get it wet. Lordy no. One challenger dipping on the exhale would have the entire field in cardiac arrest, though the poor Catholic church in Greenup would need more loaves for its Friday dinner, to feed the mass of attendees.

The river begins in Ivoryton, passes that breath-bated church, and continues to the station, located respectfully within the city of Mini-Manhattan. In spite of the danger, the alderman of Ivoryton, a certain Mr. Portwater, continues selling tickets up til the morning of.

That morning a group arrives hollering demands. They are workers and their strike has

left them without the ability to buy those tickets, in addition to making the rewards damn stimulating. Longshoremen march in without prompting and intimidate the workers. Everybody comes to blows. The hairy alderman makes big violence, but he is caught in a headlock and tossed in the river. An oscilloscope is tossed in after. The Catholics pray an extra-long rosary for the workers' champion, Road Man the Lattimer.

The reporting in the evening edition of the fight can be generally discredited. RM the L is charged with espionage. While in prison he trains nine coalfield schleppers in the art of infiltration. The Sergeants hold the race again the following year, bodily healed and indifferent to the episode. With not a one stepping foot in the water, the schleppers liberate the rewards and the Sergeants' faces. They put them on pie plates and give them to the Road Man's children who take them off, nail them to stumps, and invent frisbee golf.



## X-Ray of a Broken Neck

The day passed without Georgi seeing it. Tuesday appeared invisible. It was as though his eyes were on the border, where it tends to separation. When there's no thought, there's no sight.

It was the next day and he was thinking. Return the memories, he said aloud. He was in the panic bathhouse. A spa without a staff, it took some weeks to find the nerve to go inside. How lit it was surprised him. There were skylights in the place. He considered leaving. He looked a while up at them. They were smudged and filmy, the drones could not see through.

Aren't you from Eastern Europe? Lyman asked.

You haven't heard me speak, Georgi said.

But I can tell from your looks, Lyman said. I'm the queen of slavophiles.

Lyman rubbed the alphabet into his back. The letters, super super. Someone else came up. *Le three-way*, Lyman called it. It was ordinary



pre-love. Not one was bare. For Georgi it made him, and he recharged the ones around him. Father's precious had no qualms. He turned over. Now boobies, he said.

Georgi travels there. The past is a pig to us all. He wanted him. Lyman with his trumped-up religion, praising their relationship. They were lab mates testing satisfactory fusion. Lyman called them the be team.

Lyman wrote the report and put Georgi's name on it. It was a good thing to have. Among the printed tables the apertures aligned. Making paper makes proof.

But today was encroaching on the tale.

Close the memories, Georgi said aloud. The place switched time.

Lyman rubbing his feet was fading into dark. He looked up. I'm lifting, Lyman said.

Typical socks.



## Intersecting Lives

The Indian says, "The timber, it Marguerite's." She is developing the land. She makes the transport that builds Pittsburgh. She's got the anti-saloon league behind her too. They're marching on State Street at this minute.

"Marguerite! Marguerite in 1904!"

Afterward with the bars open this would be more difficult. But this is chanting at closed doors.

The bank's attitude to her castle was "immediately never." There's green enough to leave it, zoned or not. Those bankers went to Catholic school. Their interest is tithing. Marguerite tithes. She doesn't miss a week.

Marguerite's husband is the type of man who goes by first initial-middle name. Their East End parties are a hot ticket.

But the Indian is a sales clerk. He sold them the deed with all that timber. He who set them up lives in a hotel. He alone, he. With

uncrowded access to all the nickel theaters. He waits to go on Saturday for someone to sit by him. It's like there's a body of water not on the map, Indian Gulf.

They call Marguerite "Lucky Cast." Wherever she puts her line in, the fish bite. So begins her profile. The bankers get a portfolio under her nose. She won't look their way. She tests three bankers. In against one, the next returns. She is talking to her friends there in the study too. They pull her to another room. Marguerite is first and many. The bankers can't stitch her. They're pincushions but she doesn't sew.

The Indian, Charles, feels kin renditions. He hasn't been home since. The hotel is like his comedy. Supporting as which, Marguerite and F. Middle send a card to him on Christmas. But comedy is lost.

Kitty is the award. Enter Kitty in the theater on Saturday on/into the last empty seat, next to Charles. She illustrates children's stories. "Whoa, books," Charles says. He's got one eye on her and one on the screen, fork focused. It's a baseball picture, on the national twelve. It ends to cheering. The lights go up. Kitty says Charles can take her to the diner on Smith. The out under, a bold fresh basket delivers to his door. The second hooray.

During the newspaper strike, Marguerite has the wood. She prints her story unproofed. She hires the time period. She makes it hers, but that makes it small.

As on for October, which brings her a good accident. F. Middle's found his charge. He's friendly after the column. The bankers invite him to sail. Adventure team! He yearbooks the races. The paper goes on. 1984!



## The Gift Shop

Pik ran the register at the Nordic Council. The council meeting was being held in the basement of a church that twenty years ago had been renovated by musicians with fire. Pik's adding machine sat on a three-legged spruce TV tray that came up to waist-height beside a glass display case with lights inside and a sloping facing edge and the items in the case were not for sale. Pik felt useless. People came up, drawn not to him in his yellow gákti, dun jewelery buckles, and neediness, but to the stretched animal skins sewn to hoops and bowls. On them figures of little henna women stood over prone elk while flames sprang akimbo from campfires licking at them all. The people bent and cooed and lowered themselves as though stepping down the slatted glass shelves. Pik got mad. If they asked a question, he would only speak Høgnorsk to one and Høgnorsk to all.

"What is happening on this one?" a girl asked, and her father repeated the question to Pik.

“Han stutt etter braut han av og tok til å lesa filologi,” Pik said.

“Pardon?” the dad asked in plain Bokmål.

“Salmon fishing,” Pik growled.

“And this?”

“Reindeer husbandry,” he growled metally.

The girl was scared and pulled her dad by the hand away.

“In my homeland,” Pik called to the dad, “if she were not sick nor fevered, she would be with the other children aiding in the damming of the watercourse.”

“I have something here,” the dad said.

Pik stiffened.

The dad held up a pamphlet called Youth Organizations and Children’s Rights. “I took it from the stack right by you.”



## The Alcoholic and the Sign

I don't have the shakes so I know I am not dreaming. When I'm dreaming my hands don't shake, there's a full beer in them. I reach to the table for the aspirin and I drop it. Getting down on the floor would be a hassle if I weren't down there already. Some of the pills found their way into the gashes in the floorboards. I don't know how those gashes got there. It looks like I took an ox plow to it. To plow a plow and be blacked out. And my seeds are the pain pills fallen from my hands. And my hands are the hands that won't work until I have a drink. If my thoughts operated the same, I wouldn't drink at all.

A piece of shit I know calls me on the phone. "Hello assfuck," I answer. He greets me, calls me dickcheese. He needs a ride to the liquor store.

"Hold on," I say. I get the sunglasses from the table to my face. I finagle them making my hands like mittens. There are four smudges on the lenses now, one on one and three on the other. Now I can look outside. There is one

car along the curb and it isn't mine. Hell, I need a ride to the liquor store. He says he'll call another fucked up buddy of ours.

"He won't be up," I say. If he can't find some other fuck to drive us, he'll show up in a cab in 20 minutes. He says I'll have to pay.

When he arrives, it's in the type of ride we can pay in booze. "Sup cockfuck?" I say. He greets me, calls me shitbreath. Says he's come up with a new recipe, the barftini. He tells me about the 80-proof bile in his chest. He coughs it up and holds it on his tongue. Bends over to really get a good glob up. Takes the plastic bottle from the freezer and pours it in his mouth. Shakes his head vigorously no. The booze and scum globs mix all up. Makes a James Bond joke.

"No bile in me today," I tell him, "just the morning blood. I spit it in the toilet and then chase it 'round the bowl with my piss stream."

The fuckup is driving, which is hilarious. I'm sure he'd blow dirty first thing in the morning. Such a loser, this guy. He'd always threaten his wife but never did anything. Always told her he would've if he hadn't have blacked out. She wouldn't leave him til he bought her a ten dollar whore. It's a joke, he insisted. Now he can't get visitation with his kids. I think their mom told them he's in jail. He hates the guy that's raising his kids. The fuckup got remarried and that lasted like a week. I don't know how he's still got



an apartment. Probably through some bullshit.

He pulls into a gas station. "Not here, I'm banned here," I say. I'm told to wait in the car. He asks me what I want.

"You know what I want," I say. I hand him the \$2.50. A pint won't last me til dinner, he says.

"Dinner," I repeat, and we laugh. I give him a little more and we pull our funds for a fifth.

We're sitting in the lot there, passing the booze back and forth, joking about pulling up to a nozzle and huffing it. "Thanks, dickless, mine already don't work," I say. Some kids ride up and lean their bikes against the store's big glass window. They look at me. I try to pass the bag to the fuckup and he won't take it. My hands stopped shaking though, that's a good sign. Then he tells me he's thinking it's about time.

"For what?" I say but I know what he means. I look at him. It's like he's got two butts under each eye. The capillaries in his face are ropey and protruding like the veins of a weightlifter. He's 85 pounds overweight and looks 20 years older than he is. I turn my head and pain jolts me in my back, which I can't straighten. I inadvertently see myself in the fish-eye inset in the side mirror. We're only 28.

"Are you serious?" I ask him sarcastically, laying on the disgust. Yeah, he says, look at me, I'm about used up, can't keep this up, when I try to sleep I wake up after a few minutes because it hurts, I can't breathe.

"You're a pussy," I say. He says he forgot what that is. After I check myself into The Center, he says, maybe when I get back I'll take a chance and try to remember, but you'll be the first person I come see.

"Go on then, you might as well go in right now," I say. He knows I'm not seeing things his way, I just want the fifth for myself.

It's a couple weeks later. I get up and drink til I pass out. Only thing that broke my routine in that time was a trip to the emergency room. I had a seizure in the 7-11. First time that's happened. I'm embarrassed because it was the clerk who knows me, but I don't give a fuck cause I leveled up - made the ICU. Now I'm home and it's daytime and I'm a dumbshit because I only bought beer. I'll stick to that, is what I told myself in the hospital. But the beer's not working. I'm restless. I decide to clean. I sweep all the butts and cans off the table onto the floor. Then I stand there. I hate myself and I don't care anymore and now I can't even get trashed.

The fuckup calls. I'm back, let's go to the bar, he says.

“Fuck that, dumbfuck,” I say. Look don’t worry about me, he says, I’m on the same path I was always on.

I hesitate and skirt the issue, saying, “Save your money. Let’s go to the store and come back here.” No, he says, the bar, it’s his treat. I’m reluctant. Not because he just got back, and he shouldn’t whatever, but because I know what it’s going to be like being with him in public. How it will make me feel. When he pulls up, I was right. He grins. He shows me his new driver’s license. The picture on it matches the face of the kid I see in front of me. The fuckup’s 21 years old. Looks like he’s in high school for chrissakes. It’s making me have horrible thoughts.

Get in, Mam-aw, or do you need a bus ramp? he asks. I don’t want to go. I go. He starts telling me what it was like when he went in. You remember, he says, if I looked like shit I guarantee you I felt like a puddle of piss. I nod. You should go in, he tells me. He leans over and sniffs me. It’s about time, isn’t it, he says. I nod. I have no intention of going. He goes on, telling me about how they put him to sleep like it’s surgery and when he woke up he couldn’t believe how he felt, how the world is, because he was so used to everything hurting so much, and feeling so bad, and now it’s like he’s in a cartoon world. You can run off a cliff, hang there in the air until you realize there’s nothing below you, and start kicking your legs and run back onto land again and the only shit that falls is the puff of smoke you leave hanging out there. He goes on

like that the whole ride. It pisses me off.

It feels weird being in a bar and weird being with a kid. He loves it though. He's all over the place. A couple girls come in with a couple guys and he goes right up to them, the girls, and starts bullshitting them. I'm at the bar. I'm not talking to no one. I'd leave but his tab's open. Double vodka's til the barman cuts me off. The fuckup is cool about it. We've been in this spot before, where one guy's gone in and the other hasn't. He's knows I'll go when I'm ready. But he doesn't know this time is different. I'm going to push it. I want to make it to age 30. Break my record. I've been hitting the booze a little harder each day. Training. Only thing that gets cheaper around here is my life.

It's only a couple weeks more before I give up and go in. It's starting to get too scary. I have a seizure, then another, and then one every day for three days in a row. The fuckup practically ties me up and drags me to The Center. I can have a stroke at any time. Liver and kidneys, I expect, but if I fuck up this brain that's it. What if I can't talk, or move? If I'm in a hospital bed hooked up to IVs, and I can't even tell them that I want them to hang a quart of vodka and be done with it?

The fuckup doesn't come in, doesn't want to. He doesn't like to be here if he doesn't have to. I go in and sign the papers and wait. When they bring me back they do that thing I hate. They take my picture. I have to strip down for it. It's to remind you how you got last time,

they say, so maybe you won't do the same thing next time, this is a fresh start, blah blah. I fucking know. I've deleted enough of those pics from the last times. They wheel me into the room with the bright lights. Fucking doctors wear blue masks so you can't see what they look like. Count backwards from something, they say. I strain to hear but their voices are muffled.

And then I sit up and they hand me a mirror. I can't believe it. I look great. The gray hair is gone. I laugh. I'm not sure I have to shave. It doesn't look like it. What are you going to do when you leave? the exit counselor asks.

"I don't know," I say and it sounds in my head like I'm talking fast, "I want to do a triathlon, or just, take karate, hike every national park, just go for it." She smiles. That sounds great, she says, but be careful with your new body. It takes a week for the clone to really get broken in. I say okay.

It's weird, for a minute there I really thought I might do that stuff. But now I'm thinking about the scotch I'd bought special for me at home. The first drunk in a fresh clone is the most amazing feeling.



## Acabou

There's a lot to say while there's still time. Over the summer I dug up the back of the farm and buried the shelter. I hooked up the pipes: water, air, and waste. I stocked it full of non-perishables, firearms, cots and blankets, a cooktop, camp gear, an exercise machine. Non-perishable. Though the shelter's buried deep I know a major fallout would kill us. I'll take it. The only solution for that is to go somewhere no nukes would follow, and in the mountains of Indonesia they eat people. Try being white there.

I haven't told my wife. Secrecy is part of survival. The place that sold me the shelter has destroyed the records of the sale. That was part of my contract with them. I drove the flatbed myself, then hitched it to the tractor and hauled it to the dig. When my wife asked about it I said irrigation. It's kind of the truth.

I hope she never has to know. I really do. But she will. She'll face it when the world does. It'll be soon enough, just a few more hours to go. In the sky the light's going out. There's

a cloud that looks like a face. It's on the tapered end like it has a muzzle, like a rat. It's facing east where the dark is starting. Most everybody's got their back to it, I imagine. They're taking in the sunset. Well they would. I'm facing east and my eyes are already adjusting.

I still have so much to say. The Jets are screw-ups and they got the record to prove it. They never gave Tebow a chance. Sanchez isn't the answer. He was only good when they had good players around him. After they traded everybody and the rest got hurt, look what happened to him. Sanchez is no more the answer in New York than Flacco is in Baltimore. I wish these GMs took a look at Reddit once in a while. I said this was going to happen.

But there's something I realized tonight, standing in the doorway looking at my kids watching the same DVD they watch every night, my wife with her legs pulled up under her on the couch, smiling right before the gags come, and the girls laying on their stomachs on the floor, propped up on their elbows with couch pillows under and their nightshirts on. It took me a minute, secretly watching my family, while they thought I hadn't come in from chores yet, to realize that Sanchez and Flacco are really good, and so is Henne and Fitzpatrick. The league's full of good quarterbacks. It's just that Brady, Rodgers, and Brees are so good they're preternatural. They ruin it for the rest of them. It's a special time for the league, having those four great players competing at once. Guys who can drive 95 yards in 45 seconds and pull out a

win, who don't flinch at triple coverage and make the impossible throw. Each of these guys has the heart of a Roman general and that's what it takes to be a champion. If the other guys don't have that it's not their fault. That's a rare thing, that kind of heart. It's a freak accident that four people in the world have it. I love my family. They never minded going without to see these guys play in person. Following these guys every season has been a privilege, it really has. That's what I'll miss when... tomorrow...

It's almost time to get everybody dressed and go down to the shelter. No, it's not fair. If you want to know what I think, Rodgers would've got his second ring this year.





## Cloven

Through a complicated mess of feelings I have become pregnant. The father is Bladd. We meet for drinks. Water is life, but the water here is black and sodden. It's up to my waist. There are animals in it. It rots the plants that grow and they sink as pumice to the bottom where they deteriorate more and the chunks of waste diffuse in all the sloshing, turning the water black. This is where I live.

I was surprised when I met Bladd living here too. The mangroves surround us like suspension bridge cables. They're cascadingly kinked. Light from the sea tries to dart among them, gives up, and dies. To look at the mangroves is to look at black.

I don't know how Bladd came to be here. But that a man made a home in the same swamp as I... it seemed right to accept him. He startled me of course. He approached like unto a legion, hovering, exacting, on patrol. I watched him taking slow strides, from one end to the next, and back, paddling with his hands. The humidity was gross. I for my part

lay on my side propped up on one elbow upon a mound of moss. Such was all I had for dry land. He had a box-cutter for a sword, and a quarter flap of cardboard for a shield. Wadded packing tape made up the handle. A man like that was ready for a move.

On his eight or tenth pass I signaled to him. He waded to my feet.

"Minnie," he told me, when after all I asked him, which took courage, as we'd undertaken to assume that questions were forbidden, and to go back on this would necessarily make what was said important, and furthermore to be the first to do so would show that one had weaknesses, "when I came here I had wounds upon my legs. They first appeared as I became a man. They looked a fright in a tunic. I packed them with wet clay, I wound them in cloth, I lay out in the desert sand. Regardless they would not heal. One dip, here, and I was cured."

That bothered me. I held out my hand, Bladd gave me his, and I took mine away. I returned my open palm until he gave me what I wanted. I snapped off the dull tip of the box-cutter blade. It only took two clicks to expose it and a little pressure against the trunk. It flipped through the air with a ting without glinting. It landed in a nutria's eye. The animal dove into the water. I fixed upon the ripples. The cultures in that soup would infect a wound in a jiff. It would sink to the bottom and soon diffuse its putrescence.

"I was thinking of the baby. We could drain

this land," he said. I laughed to myself.  
Land.

"I'm sure I could find another like this," I  
replied. I'd meant this swamp, but he thought  
I meant the situation, him.



## I, Bud

1.

I, Bud, could be described as a lost satellite, in that such a thing is there, can be mapped with math by its rate and orbit, yet cannot communicate, and because of this we speak of it as gone. That is more than we can say for some things which can talk but we don't know where they are. Who wants to pay to know. I went to the store and got overcharged. When I protested, the clerk set my things beneath the register and called for next in line. I was not seen again. I felt unmoored. Cases where the feeling is desired were not this. It's as disorienting as a call from the dark. Could it be a baby or a cat in heat, I wonder. I always conclude it's a cat. No one leaves her baby outside for an hour. Babies are only ever heard alongside adults. There are places in this world where babies are never heard: phone poles, spear closets, and the mail room. A person sends a letter, expecting a response. It does not come. The letter is said to be lost. Itself it could be so. It fell from the mailbag or was flagged in transit. It was thought to contain cannabis. It was thought to be seditious. In such times the fault is with the envelope. We do not say

the person who ignored it is lost. Not called into question is her ability to talk. Radio is not fallible, the post is. That the recipient may have done what she did is terrible for the sender to consider. Thus it is not. There must be another reason. This is our first axiom: there is always another reason. All communication is pernicious. One of its properties is implicit demand. Compassion has this, though it is desired. Speaking is calling for reaction. A minimal eye twitch can satiate like carrot cake. But unreaction, that's apoplexy. The confusion is serrated and the speaker turns it on himself. We may expect a cry of pain to follow. His insistence grows clamorous as the moment lengthens. The listener gives in. As soon as she does, she begins to calm again. Being allowed to feel as she did before is her reward for reacting. A second property of communicating: it is the forced transfer of feeling. Speakers want the others to feel as they do. In crowds at rallies is a given. But too it's in families where the currency is love. One affects change on another and, seeing a reaction, is actualized. There has never been a solipsist. Freedom-loving people stop talking. It is easier to text.

2.

Oh, Bud. ...Hey. Where have you been?

Oh, just living with people all the time. All the time.

I feel your shmeal \*mumbles\*.

What?

Can I tell you something that's on my nerves?

What.

You have this meat hanging off your gut, which is your gut. I'd like to cut it off and do something with it.

You've had too much speed/beer/PCP.

No, I'm sober.

That is scarier than what you just said, Duck.

Happy Jesusween, buddy.

What have I done to make you claim my pound of flesh?

Only being around me. I look at you, I notice what your body's like. Parts of it have gotten to me.

Through no fault of my own.

Through maybe some fault of your own.

I have to eat, don't I?

Yes.

I have to drink.

God knows.

Can I tell you something? Everyone has a problem. With you.

Think of how many people want to move into the future.

I was. How?

All kinds of people. Most people in the world want to move into the future. People trapped where they are but who will be free later. Prisoners of all kinds. Those of the state and those of bad parents. Those in bad marriages. People trapped where they are but *hope* they will be free later. People having a bad day, or a bad week. People with good lives faced with an unpleasant task. Or one distasteful. Those facing grief. The broken-hearted. People who thought they were in a good marriage but their spouse thought not and now it's over. Children who don't want to be in school, in the store, or inside, or outside. People in traffic in the rain who drive a manual shift.

That gets old quick, and it wears out your knees. People who are bored. Everyone at his job who doesn't like his job. People in the process of being shamed. People who got caught. The hungry, thirsty, cold, homeless, and overheated. Those with those things but dissatisfied by them. Princes and princesses. The unpromoted. Children in the months before Christmas. People whose agendas haven't been adopted. The unadopted. The unheard, unshown, unpublished, and unemployed. The injured of all kinds. TV watchers when the power goes out. People who think about exercising. First-time runners half-way through. Phobics confronted with their phobias. The unloved. Those who can't afford something. Addicts. Diners whose favorite meal was taken off the menu. Sick people. The bullied. Those whose flight was delayed. People who've left only to realize what they've forgotten. The ambitious and the entitled. The gregarious when left alone. Someone sunk in collector-mania. Small business owners. Anyone who cannot marry. Teenagers. Hitchhikers. Fed swimmers for about thirty minutes.

All of them want to move into the future?

Yeah.

You know -

What?



You know how many want to move into the good past? Everybody in the world.

Right.

But there must be some exceptions. Maybe some want the present to slow down and last longer.

Very few. Those on the brink of death, those who just won something, those currently witnessing an accident, and the newly in love. That's it.

3.

The top of Bud's skull had the prickly tingles as though it were asleep. It hurt and his chest did too. He had his palm over his nose, his thumb and fingers pulling down the skin under his eyes, showing the red. He hadn't realized there was a draft until the room's cool air rushed to his exposed eyeballs. It took his mind off what happened. Having leaned back a hair he relaxed his muscles and the air in the cushion of the black leather armchair that caught him made a steer's angry snort. For a while he wasn't moving.

"Bud?"

"Could you... get me the..."

"The... rechargeable wine opener?"

"No, not that."

"The Mangroomer?"

"The remote."

Nurse Yu Wen handed him the remote.

"What happened to you?" she asked.

"Ice cream. The road."

"You went after an ice cream truck? Bud, you're no smartie."

Bud harrumphed wetly. Yu Wen looked away. *Pegasus Monday Live!* was on tv and she became distracted by the man with the voice-over voice and Dapper Dan hair standing holding a too thin microphone up to a woman who in a noticeable contrast to him had done her own makeup and hair. She was swaying on the stage in indecision about whether to accept the R\$22 bribe to distract the hunky security guard watching the mall store exit, or risk that money and potential ribald pat-down for the chance to run from one end of a factory hog farm to the other in the humidity of noon-time. If she didn't slip in the waste and if her post-run blood test showed no H1N1 she

would win R\$42, no breath mask or respirator allowed. Yu Wen flipped it off.

"Hey," Bud wheezed, "the girls..."

Yu Wen turned it back on, muted. The line of staggered showcase models, empurpled under the operating room lights, smiled to their molars at the woman taking off her heels and putting surgical footies over her bare feet in preparation for her run.

"Don't worry," the host said, "our sponsor's tests show the bacteria on the slaughter floor is non-motile!"

The audience applauded.

"Bud," Yu Wen asked, "what happened?"

"It was the vicar. He got it by the village lock up," Bud said wincing. He pushed his hand between his back and the chair, his elbow pointing subconsciously toward the kitchen.

"The vicar with the hand tremors? Was he wearing shoes? Were you?"

At this Bud lifted his feet off the floor. He seemed surprised.

"I must've kicked them off near the door," he said.

"I shall have to drive to the vicarage now and check on him," Yu Wen said. "And I am tired. I've been in the basement for hours breaking down the gymnosperm."

"The..."

"For varnish. The baby furniture? I'm going to strip the white paint off. Once it gets a good stain it will be acceptable."

"Look, don't go outside," Bud said. "Just wait around a while. After supper."

"After supper it will be dark."

"I know. Could you..." He craned his neck around her as she was between him and the tv.

"Give me that," Yu Wen said.

Bud pulled the remote away. She kept reaching for it and he kept moving it, this way and that. She grabbed his wrist.

"All right, all right," he said. "Look. I was by the lock up waiting for young Stephen Duck. We were meeting to discuss strategy. He's the anchor of our team at the gala tug o' war. You know the flagpole there? He unwound the rope from it and was pulling it hand over hand. He was bending it. The metal flagpole! Mark my

words Yu Wen, he could've been the next Gustaf Söderström.

"He had situated himself such that the pole was quivering and his heels were lifting up. His face, his neck, were dark red. I let out a whoop, cheering him on, but he could go no farther. Then the vicar comes around the bend with a couple little ones. They had their ice creams and were dressed for Sunday school. One of them goes, "Wow," and runs right at Duck. Well, he could do nothing. Neither could I. The child grabbed the back of Duck's belt and pulled. Only, she hadn't let go of her ice cream. The vanilla soft-serve went right down Duck's bum.

"'I'm helping,' she yelled. 'Stop helping!' I yelled back. Duck must have unclenched because the button of his trousers shot off like a coin flip and they came down. The flagpole sprang. The force of the rebound ripped his arm off, and as he'd wrapped the rope around it, it swung through the air and smacked the vicar in the noodle. The vicar fell on the other child and got an ice cream down his bum. Duck's screaming. His arm's bouncing back and forth while the flagpole vibrates to a stop. I had two men and two kids down. I got the arm off the rope and spun around, brandishing it for Duck. Seeing that the kids started screaming, I called 999 and handed the phone to one of them, grabbed Duck in a fireman's carry, and took off with the arm. I knew hearing a screaming child would bring the coppers quick. By the time I got to my car I thought I was having a heart attack. Duck had

the sense to rip up his shirt and make a tourniquet...”

Bud trailed off.

“Did the ambulance come?” she asked.

“He drove himself, actually. Steely fellow. Do you know I walked all the way home? It’s over one mile. It took an hour, Yu Wen.”

“And the others? The kids?”

“Fine, they’re all fine. But in case the coppers are still about asking for witnesses, it would be best to stay inside a while. Christ, I feel terrible. Need something to take my mind off things. So it looks like they’re revealing the blood test...”

He could barely lift his slumped hand so he wagged a finger at the tv.

“Bud,” Yu Wen said, “you’re a –”

“A hero. I should check my – Duck said he’d call when they got the arm reattached. Where’s my cell – Damn. The kids have it. How shall I explain that?”

4.

I, Bud, am here in Doorn. I'm fair, and my eyes are dry like sugar cubes. I first married Duck to a flourish of horns and applause in grandfather's backyard. Later the state divorced us without our consent. Whether it was this defeat or his genetic propensity for addiction, we did not last much more. This life brings troubled minds where they're unwanted. For a time I'd blamed our neighbors, they were not just. But looking back I had such thoughts as are like to overcome me. How I treated his children, he'd had them young, they were not mine, their visits were protracted by the court, they didn't want to be here and when they were they were sullen, sensing that feeling in me, and after what tills I'd toil I would be borne into my grave without any of my own. I saw that children were possessions I could not make or steal.

When his children weren't with him I went about lighter. I wished to spread my notion to him. I had many wishes then, purebreds, my Roman diet book. But desire was laid upon him. Duck hid and smoothed it over though it always wrinkled up again. I arranged a holiday in Württemberg. It was meant as a baptismal dip. When he came up he'd steal up from behind, put his arms around my chest, hum into my ear, and rock us side to side. I'd held my shoulders tense, gradually abandoning the wait for it again. It was to be his holding, what I had chose him for. Instead I found him on our hostel's floor. I took his hand and felt his wrist a-trilling. I put him in the tub. I told

the duchy at the desk and spent the paramedic interlude with a bucket, carrying ice and letting it fall on him. He was in the hospital and I was in our home. Most of the time I stood. The mother took their children there to see him. I wondered how long my arms were folded. I returned to Saxony.

I met Emanuel. Ours was a morganatic marriage, it has lasted 30 years.





## Ghosts in the Earpiece

Money talks. We are not on speaking terms. It's not that I'm not listening. I listen hard. But it knows when I'm around. It won't talk. Some guys like J. Fred hear it fine. Money likes him. It cozies up. If it likes you you're set. You'll get a car and a porch to park by. You'll get an ice box.

I don't want to marry it. Actually I do. But I could stand to catch a word or two. I want to sidle up to J. Fred and it. I could get something to eat. To overhear it talking to J. Fred for only a second is enough. A second buys a cup of coffee. Three seconds gets you eggs and toast. That's how fast money talks. It doesn't take listening long.

What pains is it ignores me. It's not like I've got a busted hearing aid. Mine came from Park Ave. I know it works because the old lady heard me. I asked her the time. I took my hat off when I said it. I wanted to be respectable. She didn't tell me. She kept going. But now she was distracted. That's what I wanted. I reached from behind her real

quick. She didn't let go of her her bag. If I weren't weak from hunger I'd've had it. We pulled it back and forth. I hoped it would rip and spill. I wanted to grab the money from the sidewalk. With her money in my pocket, so close to me, it would've spoke so loud its voice would've drowned her out. But the bag didn't rip. I was trying to knock her down. She had heels on. She wouldn't let go. I made a grab for her earrings. I got her earpiece.

I keep thinking she's going to call. Her voice will come out and I'll hear it in my head. That's the feeling I have when I wear it. I put it in my ear. I go down in the subway. I distract the cop. "'Tis Mr. Dinkelspiel, drunk!" Then I hop the turnstile. I stand on the platform by the stairs. When the train comes I turn it down. I circle. I like to get close to a couple roughnecks or a couple guys like me. I turn the earpiece all the way up. Guys like that are full of schemes. They got plans. They got their money front and center. They're looking at it in the eyes.

Well, I'm looking them in the eyes. They don't know it. I'm looking at my shoes or a paper with a mustard smear. But I'm looking them right in the eyes.

When it don't work out I wait. Usually it doesn't. But once in a while I catch money's voice. Not some guys talking in its voice but its real voice. It doesn't know I can hear it, money. Else it wouldn't talk just then.

Sometimes I think it knows. It teases me. I'll be on one side when I hear it across the tracks. Two businessmen laughing their hats off. I want a bridge then. A bridge made of gold. I want to feel my feet on that. Instead I got these stairs. I run up, across, and back down the other side. The businessmen are gone.

At night I eat at my usual place. They reserve a table for me there. It's called Misery Hall. The buffet is serve yourself. They got spoons, bowls, and paper napkins. They got metal pans with kerosene burners underneath. You lift the lid and the steam comes at you. It gets in your nose. It's nothing but hot water, not fit to drink.

I go looking for J. Fred. I hate him since he showed my sister Plymouth Rock. He goes around in a sailor cap. He hasn't been in the service. I hear him whistle. It's a wonder he can get those two goose lips together. The city's fishing. The bait looks fine. I know there's a hook in there but I haven't eaten. J. Fred's waiting for me.

"Where you been?" he asks. I hate this joke. "San Antonio, Antonio?"

"Been up to the pearly gates. They ain't heard of you, Fred."

"And here I was going to tell you about a job."

I wait for him to say it. I'm not going to ask. Besides I don't hear money in it.

"There's a pantomime down Beam St. They need a sprite. You're a little guy, so I thought of you. See there's a Blarney and his Mary. A seed falls from their tree and a wee sapling grows. He hears the call to Tipperary. Off he goes. While she's staring out to sea, the sprite steals their baby. Mary tears some switches off the tree. She makes a pine cone wreath. She chases you around. When she catches you, she puts the wreath around your neck and lights it on fire."

Maybe this will get me close to money. Or some fried baloney. But I act mad.

"The children will love it," J. Fred says.

I tell him okay. I head off. I leave but he's flapping those lips.

"I've got a show later too," he calls after me. "I'm playing pilgrim with a..."

I turn the earpiece down. I hate him. Down Beam St. I find it. They got a nativity set in the vacant lot. Kids are there. They yell about everything. I find the guy. This is the part where my belly always drops. I ask for the job. He asks if I'm sure. I can size him up. I can spot his billfold. But I'm too scared to ask for pay. I just say I'm hungry.

I have to put my X on a piece of paper. He tells me what the sprite does. Then they get started. Half the kids sit down. The dads are drunk. It's my time to go out. I take the baby doll and hide. The kids boo and hiss. But the moms are looking at me. It feels good.

"Antonio, you need to leave. Go now."

It's coming from the earpiece. "What?" I whisper.

"This is Marjorie Waltz of Park Ave. You know who I am. Listen to me, Antonio. You must not finish this play. You're going to be hurt."

"But the kids," I say. "The moms."

"That fire will go out of control and you'll be burned up so bad no one will be able to stand you. Put the baby down, leave the cape, and go. Now."

"Should I, Marjorie?"

But I don't wait. I run off, through the vacant lot and down the street. I hear some yells behind me. Maybe they think I ruined the show. I keep going til I'm out of breath. I get dots in my eyes. There's a truck convoy going by. How patient the city is.

“If I come to Park Ave.,” I ask, “if I come straight there, will you give me supper?”

I wait. I jiggle the earpiece. I make sure it’s all the way up. I wait. I make sure again.

She says yes.



## Beggars of Brasília

There are lizards on the sidewalk in the sun. Its edge has crumbled and they run beneath too fast to catch. How much more of this. There won't be any snow for five years.

Where I am it stultifies and the *flanelinhas* have a protection scheme. *Flanelinhas*, because traditionally they wore flannel. I park my car and they come up to me. They'll watch it while I go inside. They'll make sure nothing happens to it. When I come back, up they come. "Bud," they call. When they ask my name I feel I have to tell them. "Bud." It's before I can lift the handle of my door. I have to look them in the eye. They stand close. There is only a space for two women shoulder to shoulder, perpendicular, between us. The *flanelinhas* do not smile. The breeze blows our scents away.

The thing they want is money. I feel I have to. Their friendly words are there to fight my doubt. For their services I take them at their word. Perhaps they chased away another like themselves, one gripping pliers with paint flecks in its teeth.

There are coins in my car in the tray that sticks. It requires I yank. That requires I sigh. After they have them they make a joke. Only one smiles and it is me. Both our faiths have been rewarded. They that they were paid, and I that I could pay. It is a good feeling, trust and rapport.

Ignoring them would make me ill. They forget an insult straight away and I'd be left to brood. Hours tensed and unmellifluous. But in fact they remember. If I give, they know my face for next time. And if I don't then they'll know me for that. As I reverse they direct me like an airplane. The vents in my car pipe hot air. They do not seem to feel the sun. I see them lean on the next car. They beat a rhythm on its roof, calling for the next man to come. Where I'm from that would get you shot. Beating on another man's car. I wonder if they were doing that to mine. I think to check my roof when I am home. But I do not. What I did for this was not very much. But I will put it from my head.





## Yes, Chef!

A scorpion crawled into camp. It was long, green, and frustrated, drumming its legs on the red clay dirt like a mathlete sans tech. It seemed to know where it was headed. It was night and a fire was going, flashing in calculated trapezoids. Peaks were continually set and reset. Missing was the measuring tape. The scorpion approached.

“That is still hot, yes,” it thought, sort of.

Though it knew (as it were) the light exposed it to predators, it continued forward. A spark spared it further trepidation, arcing with a pop from the sibilant bed and landing centimeters away, where it lit a stem of *jabuticaba*. The scorpion snatched it in its claw and scurried with its torch back the other way to where the thrip lay. The thrip was flipping over once and again, further crushing its injured wing. As it sensed the torchlight it grew more frantic still.

The scorpion pulled up just short and, with a back-lean that was not hesitation, speared the thrip in its stinger. It raised the creature up and held it over the ember on the stem in its claw. Patiently the thorax, then the head. When the thrip's injured wing was burned away completely, the scorpion dropped the stem and dug in.



## A Hip Hop Murder

South America, interior, 1978. Freddy O'Clare locked Jackson F. to the street. Jackson's sin was going to *Up Jump the Boogie* in his suit of armor. Freddy used a mecha-pogo that pounded rivets into the asphalt like a compulsive pecker. The rivets restrained Jackson's arms in a hip hop dance pose. His imminent chalk outline would suggest the chicken dance instead, with hands abreast and elbows at the point. Freddy's song came on and he skipped back inside.

Jackson kicked his legs asunder, trying to contort a yogic SOS for the tram engineer bearing down on him, but this man was the sort who wore wolf T-shirts and rationalized only what could lessen his work. He was sure Jackson was a thrill seeker, or a spastic, neither of which legally bound him to do anything, so he pulled his warhead whistle. Being of a piece with a tram it went ding-dinger.

Only then did Jackson grow angry. With a deft kick-step he flung the sandal from his foot.

It was a mark of his dexterity that he was able to curl the two toes on either end, leaving the middle one extended. He waved this in the air. The hyper-extension his enthusiasm caused was not enough to impede the sandal as it bounced off the cow-catcher, arc'd, and met him in the face. Jackson's distraction and involuntary embouchure led to the severing of his other foot, the left. Its sandal got flattened under the tram wheels and so was unsuitable for even the poor. Not that the St. Vincent de Paul Society didn't later try. Passengers on the tram who had their windows open got spurted aortally. Jackson went into shock and his last meal was his tongue.

Inside the venue a guy with a mic live-sampled the tram's ding. He cut it into his wax. Jackson's death scream gave the track its name, sounding something like Shabadoo. The DJ rapped:

All through the night it's me and you  
Any time I'm down for the Shabadoo

*[translated from the Portuguese]*



## A New Cartoon Short

A dog and a cat are standing outside on a sidewalk, which curves around the foot of a sloping grassy hill. The top of the hill touches a white puffy cloud in a blue sky. There are no trees, no phone poles or electric wires, and no birds. Not even the road, presumably necessitating the sidewalk, is visible.

The dog is a pug. He wears a black derby between his ears and smokes the stub of a cigar. The cat is made of ice. Instead of fur and skin he is frozen, but he isn't that odd, psychedelic translucence that makes ice sculptures on party trays hard to see, he's the dun silver that's the color of wispy clouds that move in ahead of a storm. And although he's made of ice he moves, he can see, he's alive. In the distance a mouse approaches. All the animals walk upright.

What the dog and cat are doing on each minimalist cartoon cell is moving a refrigerator. The fridge is an old model,

bulky and white, and its rubber seal is peeling away in the top corner.

"Set it down, set it down," the dog says.

"Oof," the cat says.

The dog lifts his hat and mops his brow. The cat shakes out his arms.

"I can't feel my carpal pads," the cat says.  
"And this heat."

"It's dingo-brutal," the dog says, taking the fridge door handle.

"Don't open that!"

"Don't?"

"You'll let the cold air out and everything will spoil."

The dog changes his cigar to the other corner of his mouth.

"You mean you got me to lug this thing halfway to Cherokee Plaza and didn't tell me the reason it's so heavy is you *left food* in it?"

"It's not food," the cat says, "it's my babies. In the ice cube tray."

Meanwhile the mouse is getting close. He plods through the grass, each footfall a thud, shocking the muscles in his back, nigh-pitched on his face from the momentum on the downgrade. The little fella is exhausted. His shoulders are dented horseshoes from the long poles slung over them with baskets tied to each end. He's been scavenging food and metal at the city dump. At the tent city nearby the refugees appreciate him, he can really dig and get to the good stuff in a way they can't. The mouse sees the dog and cat and my god, a refrigerator. He hurries.

"Look," the dog says, "by the Zeroth law, in this weather, whatever air was cold in there is by now as hot as the breeze chafing my puckered butt. But maybe you can't feel that."

"I can," the ice cat says, crouching, sliding his paws under one side of it. "And I'm really good at sex. Really good, just so you know."

"Hello," the mouse says and the others stand up and look at him. "Can you spare something to drink, please?"

"That's just what I want to know," says the dog.

The cat looks at the dog sternly, ignoring the mouse.

"I'm opening it," the dog says after waiting for the cat to answer. "It's not keeping anything cool."

The seal on the door peels away like a rip of canvas. The dog reaches in and pops open a can of bitter. On the shelf on the door there's an ice cube tray. The mouse fixates on that. He hears the dog belch contentedly, sees him wipe his mouth.

"May I?" the mouse asks the cat, who folds his arms impatiently, wanting the mouse to leave.

After watching the dog take a drink and then another, feeling dizzy, the mouse finally grabs the ice cube tray and tilts it to his mouth, gulping the warm water. For the first time he feels steady on his feet. It feels like his pain has gone away. He tries to get the dog to join in a conspiratorial grin.

"Ah," the mouse says, "thank you so much."

"Those were my kids," the cat says. "You just killed my kids!"

Before the mouse can respond, the cat grabs him and holds him up. The mouse churns his feet on the hot empty air, getting nowhere. The cat shrinks his ice paw to a point and stabs it in the mouse's mouth and down into his gut, like a javelin. Opaque cartoon smoke rises. Under it he torture-drowns him with



internal bleeding. When it clears the mouse is on the ground with X's for eyes.

"Come on," the cat says, "someone needs this fridge. But we can't be in the tent city after dark."



## The Wiener Platz Affair

[Redacted], Austria, the year 184x. The weather was Spring-like, two days since the last rain. A wagon carrying a ladies' aid society struck one embarreled with smokeless powder, a propellant for firearms and nouveau invention. Unlike black gunpowder, the smokeless variety made weapons more reliable, as it didn't gunk up all the parts.

The two wagons met violently one Sunday on the Wiener Platz during the bustling Wiener Markt, whose sausage buffet was the tube de la tube of the region. The explosions caused the pigeons in distant Olof-Palme-Platz to careen into the statue of St. Nicholas as they took to the sky at once. Frau Barbara Nejessgleba, society chair, was merely ruffled, the way it always goes for those in privileged positions, while Frau Elisabeth Endlweber was prostrated and debilitated. Two of these ladies accustomed to giving aid, not needing it, Fortunee Einfalt and Anna Alland, lay horse-collared, with their heads between the wheel spokes, hissing. Another, Frau Hedwig Erjautz, experienced both a fast heart rate and

somnolence. And it was thrush for Frau Paula Ambroz, as Rosa Wiesinger exhibited symptoms more akin to vomiting.

They were re-wagoned and sent home to their husbands, whose concern turned by day's end to annoyance at having always to yell to be heard. For the ladies though it was a blessing. While they remained under standing orders, the quotidian whines and drunken incoherence of their husbands could be plausibly ignored.



## Help, Coach

Well, because of college football, my knees went. I tore cartilage in both of them, by which I mean that it was my responsibility for placing myself in a situation that allowed it: I suited up, put my arms around my teammates, and lined up at my position, where after winning a goal-kick header a guy I knew, and had drank with down Surrey Lanes, tackled me spikes-up right in the genuflectors, both at the same time. I hit the air like a fish tossed across a dock market, and I dropped as by a hesitating rookie, and her mitt was the Metro section meant to wrap me, and I the fish ripped through it from the force of the toss, which made the newsprint like my knees, and my surprise like hers, the rookie's, but where the drop brought her to understand embarrassment and shame, the football tackle had me come to terms with excruciating physical pain of the type whose only empath is a creature fished from its atmosphere, unable to breathe.

I came to myself in an ambulance, which I found strangely quiet on the inside, so much

so that when I was unloaded I asked the medics about it, forcing them to confess that having triaged my state they thought I wasn't worth the siren. Too right, I grunted manlyly. From the relief their administration of pricey synthetic opiates gave me I was able to reactivate, using a variation of the winning-goal fantasy, the emotional triggers that had been powered-off in the hit. In extra time in the game tomorrow, since the rules forbid my re-entry in this one, even were I to lurch from here on locked knees like Frankenstein's midfielder, I would miss the morning warm-ups and Coach would tell me not to dress, but in front of the whole team I would do it anyway, pulling up my shin guards with no sound but a compressed exhalation, and I'd take the pitch to stretch with the fellas, and by the half I'd be doing lunges from the end of our bench to the start of the opponent's, so that by extra time, with the score tied and my replacement fading, Coach would have to sub me in, and then my moves would win a corner, and the kick would deflect out to me, I'd juke three defenders, and score with an over-the-head back-heel flip.

That kept my spirit up, for a few months. It didn't help so much with my sports retirement. I put in ten years in sales and then something must have finally smiled down on me cause I somehow got on the board of the local UCATT. I divorced my wife after 16 years of marriage. I just preferred the company of the guys and I decided not to remarry. Whenever I felt down, I thought about my big comeback. Or the game

where I was hurt, jumping over that slide tackle, landing on the guy.



## Communication Breakdown

I reject that label and choose this label. This label differs from that label by a, b, c, and d. I am not the only one who believes the superiority of points a through d. Others hearing of them said it felt like amniorrhaxis. For a while we were content to be a sub- within the group. For a while it was cool. I'd be listless until the adjournment. Standing over the potluck starch platter I'd approach group members about a to d. Their opinions varied. Most said the articles were fine as-is. Others approved of a to d and thus me and I approved of them and we relished the feelings of approval we created. Some agreed with b and c but rejected d. Some projected joy at a. Irritatingly a few thought d, while on the road more traveled, was misaligned and pulling and needed modification. I was stubborn. I derided their talk. No approval was created among us. I'm sure this, not a to d, is what led to the splitting of the group. At first the d modifiers underwent mutism and stupor, and I continued. But soon they were manic. They denounced my kin and I. It took only one member to withdraw her popular Uncrumblable Meatloaf from the potluck for no

one to bring dishes anymore. Gatherings were full of stress and at adjournment we tried to kill each other in the parking lot. One a to d advocate organized a potluck of our own. It cheered us. We felt approval even as the group's disapproval hurt us. It was clear it was complete. That first sub-potluck was the coroner's signature. We continued to gather, the a to d advocates. We did good work. We brought in new members. Ours was strong and best. Everyone thought a to d were as infallible as I did. No one started murmuring about e and f. No one ever split off from us. I never thought, what next? I knew the groups as I knew myself.





## Geri, Ron, and I

Oh Geri. How I long to take Vanessa out on the shrimp boat. When I brought it up she ran away. It's a cheerless feeling to call after someone when they act like they don't hear. I've tried relating to her. I encouraged her to rap. I expect she went with you to work just to steal a pad of paper from the hotel room you were cleaning. I saw her writing on it. At the top it had the hotel name bisecting a ditto-type rebus. I'd overhear her practicing in the bathroom. When she announced she wanted to perform her rap at the end of Saving Energy Works, I felt such gratification, like I'd made a difference. I don't know what I expected, maybe something on the theme. She turned it into a beef with her baby brother.

Meanwhile the shrimp boat just floats there, moored to the dock, marked by a dirt line on its side where the water was its highest. You see me go out to watch the water. I think it will calm me and I end up looking at the boat. Geri, I thought about some things. Carrying some heavy stuff out onto the boat. Like bags

of mulch. Vanessa and I could make a design, a pyramid that would cover the old winch. It would be something to see. The boat listing in the wind, the pyramid point drawing möbius strips on the air. If we got enough weight on there the boat would sit low enough the dirty water mark would wash off. I'd carry all the bags.

Ron, it's super you learned how to relate to other people. How old were you when you did it? People Vanessa's age want to wake up in the living room and have cold pizza for breakfast and cereal for dinner. Go, take the folding chair down to the dock. Don't face the shrimp boat. Here's some cheese cubes. Why don't you see if you can get the seagulls to eat them off the top of your sun hat. I'll be down after I detangle my wig and wash it under the tap.

All right, Geri. You can use my sun hat.

Only if... Nevermind, I'd love to.



## Fitting In

I called for Gehargehunk to come inside but he wouldn't listen. This was in Bronxville, 1991. It was exasperating. Living there. Getting Gehargehunk to listen. He was used to a maritime climate. It's what he was accustomed to. Rain. Salty wind. Total cloud cover 200 days a year. We had only some of that. We had the Sound, sort of, but where we were was closer to the Hudson. Inside was the problem. There there was none of that. There's where I couldn't get Gehargehunk to go.

I wondered why we brought him here. I blame it on tourism and trade. For centuries our lands lacked relations. Accredited anyway. That changed by virtue of the Air Services Bilateral Agreement of 13 July 1990. It established direct flights between our countries. Well we went.

We wanted to see what animals, people, the sky, and rocks looked like there. We were underwhelmed and unsurprised. Only things that gave us a good time were what we had in Bronxville. Yeast excretions, fermented fruit,

bovine platters. The sameness got to us. Then we met Gehargehunk. We got attached. We suborned who we needed. Our leaving day was his. What problems.

I spent too much time walking after him in Bronxville. I wished he had something. Then the idea came. I don't know from where. It isn't my forte. But I thank whatever for it. I got him his pilot license. He became a new Gehargehunk. I'd say Capt. Gehargehunk was new. He got a run pronto. He flew seaplanes. He took them off the water and put them back there. In between was the sky. Isn't that a nice story.



## The People's Voice

The newspaper *The People's Voice* was in Jamaican trouble. It was like they got a national blast of stomach *irfaca*. Struggling to sell ads to pay the bills, their discretionary budget discreetly hit zero, causing them to miss their bimonthly donation to the USMC stationed nearby. After that, bad things began to happen to the paper. Their printer transposed several pages in the new issue, making for a costly reprint, and called in some of the debt they owed them besides. IT hired to fix the network took their server out and didn't return it. Employee cars were handicapped in the parking lot. Locally it was understood the Marines were strong-arming them, but business has never nurtured the people's anything.

The staff of *The People's Voice* were being forcibly regressed. The paper stopped paying salaries. A temporary measure. With no income they were like refugees in their own country. Tourists would see them in the morning market stalls selling rice and steamed pork in banana leaves and not know they were journalists.

Indeed they felt less like journalists themselves with each day. But they found the gumption to organize a couple of the paper's delivery vans to carpool them to the offices in the afternoons, making their calls on their personal cells and getting the stories necessary to go to press for a shortened evening edition, ran-off at a couple copy shops. They pitched in to assemble and distribute the paper and got home in time to read their kids a bedtime story, ones where the monster always died a goddamn horrible stinking death, after some real cloak and dagger shit.



## The Cemetery Glitch

When I was but a little angel I took a degree in cemetery management, a listless yet expanding field. For an empathic person like myself it was perfect. The feeling of satisfaction I got from helping the distressed dampened my inadequacies. Perhaps that makes me selfish but they say that's one of the secrets to happiness. I did some good.

With my first directorship I moved into the house on the cemetery grounds. I wouldn't have done so if I were the parent to small children. For them it would be creepy at night.

I once drove a van full of kids home from our soccer game. I was an assistant to the coach and we'd stopped and bought them ice cream after their win. It was getting dark and I didn't have my glasses. I get night blindness from other drivers' headlights so I was going slow. The cemetery on Elm Tree was on our right and with my speed remained there a while. It is quite long and it slopes downward so during the day you can see really far into

it. Now though it looked beautiful under the encroaching mulberry sky. The grass and trees were shadowed on the dark horizon. Night is when the ground and sky merge and I love it for that.

The kids' eyes were seeing something else. When one took off his seatbelt to get closer, they all did. They jostled on the big passenger-side window. Coach yelled but they didn't listen. They were yelling themselves. I see a witch, I see a zombie, I see a bunch of zombies killing the witch, taking her broom and flying this way! Squealing, scaring themselves, feigning bravery, but showing the same creativity they showed on the pitch. I experienced a temporary insanity - my hand hovered over the button that would automatically open the van's sliding door. They were all leaning against it. My finger lightly touched the button's edge. Some slight pressure, only the contraction necessary to fold a tissue, was all that was required. Just at that instant Coach really bellowed. It should've snapped me out of it. But I pressed the button.

It didn't open. Maybe I didn't push down all the way, honestly. Later that night I sat in my easy chair with the curtains open, looking out on the grounds of my cemetery. I was relieved at the glitch. I loved my job and wanted to be able to keep doing it. Being an assistant coach though, managing the living - I decided to quit. I knew it would be better to finish out the season. The kids could take my leaving hard, at least subconsciously. But



I didn't want to wait. I talked a bereaved client into becoming my replacement. I heard he did a wonderful job.



## Police Report

Born in the 40s and died in the 70s. Age, the range will suffice. Cattle, one small herd wanted. Herbs, 12 large plants. Location, Cave-in-Rock, Illinois. Family, yes. Women and children all seen regularly. After his passing they were unable to find men and fathers for the long term. Home at the time of death, fortified. Murders committed, known but unprosecuted - one. The victim's crime was criminal menace, they said, but impartial enforcement would've called it unintentional trespass to subsoil. Politics, libertarian. Icon, the man who invented a new part for the motorcycle engine, which improved something and was used across brands in all future designs. Interests, authority, the having of but non-compliance with. Also stretching out things' use, gears, wheels, piles, sports not in the Olympics, drinking.

The murder, the victim was an amateur geologist and loved to hike. He did not know the area well because he lived in another state. It had recently rained and the soil on the trail was dark and dank. He took a break

to eat a handful of gorp and poke around where it was eroded. Botryoidal crystals in a pale yellow rock caught his eye. Excited he uncovered a chunk of witherite.

At the sporting goods store in town he bought a pick, a sifter, and a knapsack. It was his nature to answer queries forthrightly. It had little monetary value, he made sure to explain, as the stone was only semi-precious. Its joy was in its scarcity. Reporting this, the shopkeep emphasized the words monetary, precious, and scarce.

Thus it was that our subject surveyed from his camouflaged deer blind the part of the trail that crossed his land. The geologist appeared early but seemed content to mine the original site, which wasn't on the subject's land, and did so much of the day. Though he could see his little rat face light up with each new discovery, the subject could do nothing. He passed the time cleaning, oiling, and wiping down his rifle and becoming infuriated.

Past dinnertime the geologist seemed from the distance to get the idea to scout the area before evening came. He moved down the trail. At the first strike of his pick into the soil there was a reverberating pop. The subject did not disturb the body except to put his gloves on and filch most of the witherite, one piece of which he stuffed into the broken earth there by the point of the pick.

The subject had served with the local constabulary, who marched up and dutifully trampled both the footprints in the wet soil and what else was unseen. They noted the lack of safety orange among the victim's garments and the statement of the county surveyor regarding what the subject owned. It will not go to trial.



## Third Wheel

It was me, her, and her new boyfriend. Before him, she backpacked across SE Asia for months. She wanted to see everything. I asked what was the most dangerous place she was in. It was a beach near Phuket, she said. They'd buy weed at the general store-shack and lie in hammocks all day. I nearly dropped out of life, she said seriously. I could feel her relief that she had the willpower to leave. To her new boyfriend, a romantic, it sounded heavenly.

I think dropping out of life is a wish we can't have, like God, she said, but we're blameless for wanting it anyway. The boyfriend went on about everything that's dead in an age of pseudo-connoisseurship. There are only 3 things to drink in this world and they all have water in them, she said. There are probably 10 things to eat. It gets old before we do, and there's a lot of time. The little details offer variety, some escape, something to concentrate on that isn't methane releasing from the melting permafrost. I mean, carbon is squat. Methane is a seeping cataract of Venusian game over. Acquiring knowledge of the little details gives an ego boost. The big

picture just gave her dysthymia.

Hearing about her trip, with them in their apartment, I admired the way she escaped her danger. When she found the depot, it wasn't beaded doorways and chaise lounges, it was too real, which meant, like so much of this world, it was dirty and poor and it was somebody's home. I asked her if it disappointed her, when she realized that dens had always been dives. She didn't answer. The boyfriend jumped in with the good times he'd had. Most of all, he deplored the way she faced down the circumstances of this world to then leave a moment of tranquility.



## A Successful Marriage

Gordon Morgan scampered up and down the White Main, selling tumor detector kits. "*Guten morgen*, Gordon Morgan," the townsfolk would say, all friendly, until he went into his spiel. Then it was "*Verpiss dich*," which is even less polite than it sounds in English.

He became lonely and took up with an international sportswoman, one predisposed to his way of thought within boundaries. Helga traveled to competitions every year. As they approached he never said anything, just ceased responding. She left without guilt. She'd explained the way she lived her life early on. In her absence he removed the clothes in her closet and bullied them, stretching them on standing lamps and giving them a cruel menacing.

On her return if his behavior carried over she'd take her new medal and strike him on the temple. When he came to he was off on something else. "Leftwich!" he went around screaming. "Leftwich! Leftwich!" as though his brain had been extirpated. She never got to know what that was all about.

A relationship with incumbent violence wasn't what she'd dreamed of, but she adapted. She liked to win. In Germany nobody's perfect, she told herself. And they'd already spent dozens of infuriating days waiting in lines, the bureaucratic hassle of smooshing their last names into one conjoined eponym. She liked the idea of forcing the record-keepers to have to update the books, the prissy *schwein*.

On her retirement from sport his attacks grew, as did their source of income, thanks to corporate sponsors. Now her smile traveled for her. Meanwhile neurologists discovered Gordon Morgan's brain had lesions, tumors, and lesions sprouting tumors, in some profane fractal neoplasm. He was nonplussed. "The detector kits work on everyone but me," he voice-activated.





## Refugee Olympians

The 1992 Winter Olympics were to be held in Albertville, France, but in Asia hundreds of athletes were spiritually unfed, all wilderness-encircled and howling. When the Soviet Union collapsed, it sent its Olympic squad to Roman Pluto. Its member states had not yet reorganized into independent nations, or if they had, they didn't rate their athletes among initiating government, tampering with the tax code, giving all the oil to three dudes, lineage, and the porting over of secret police.

It was a quandary to match the word Olympic. How could athletes, some the favored in their event, enter a competition whose core component was to rep the hood? How to shine the lusterless red of the lonely dwarf star? To hammer with dough? To have not moved but find the concrete apartment block under one's feet has transmuted to nowhere? *Whither, communist?*

These hormonally inflated men and dubious women were the heroes of Marx, raised in the

brotherhood of workers, who had all the power to be cold and hide what they were reading. And it was a brotherhood that availed them.

These reverse-Soviets were permitted to compete. Their banner was the Olympic flag. They received their spotless gold medals to the accompaniment of the Olympic Hymn. They fought for Magique, the fleshy eunuch who mascotted those games. They triumphed for a collective. That much was the same. The Unified Team, the world would forever briefly know them as.



## The Spy Transitions

Gymn was a spy. Used to be. The other day he burned out in Afghanistan. He had a compulsion, throwing firecrackers. It stuck with him. It was childish. Lots of things were. From the cruiser he watched the adults, their anger at what's inanimate, their attention swayed by what's pretty, the emotions they had at everything. Life, how boring it could be. How easy it was to get rid of being bored. The rules are in place. Everyone knows them. Gymn'd been waiting in a cafe. For his contact. Where he was there are no cafes on the street. It was at the hotel. One would think the rates would be better, Afghan hotel. Ah the magnates knew. Anyone who didn't see past a hotel could afford it. Same person'd have the sense not to set off bangs on the patio, but that's boredom. It's very big and it's very dense. Its gravity acted on Gymn. Put him in its orbit. Despite the spy game he stayed there, caught. Only thing that helped was acting outside the rules. Lessens that mass. Get it small enough and pop he'd escape. Savor this, he said out loud. His wrists hurt but he enjoyed the ride. The agency would cut him loose, they said they

would before. It was important, this ride to the station. The brain was someplace new. The sensory apparatus amplified. No job. Animal senses. The street was on Titan and the people could fly. The food was free and it was amniotic. Gymn wished they'd crack the window. Soon he'd have a new job, in the kitchen or the laundry. The ultimate in crushing routines was coming.



## Trying to Make It Work

Uninhibited, Michael ran down the slope and threw the casserole in the lake. Dish, too. The sound of the splash was preposterously low, like the belch of an opera singer. A woman was sitting on a blanket by the shore.

That's it for fishing today, the woman said.

There were three poles stood up and cast into the water, each well spaced and resting in a forked branch in the dirt, the point of their lines' entry marked by a red and white striped bob. It was these the woman kept in the corner of her eye as she ate. There was orange rind on the ground beside her, she picked it up and flung it in the lake.

It's a day of endings, Michael said.

The woman, Naomi, looked at him. He was one of those people who didn't realize he caused things, she decided.

Not for these night-crawlers, she said.

Naomi tipped over the styrofoam bait bucket

and shook it out. Black soil fell on the grass. There were earthworms moving in it and Michael was repulsed.

Rats and snakes are one thing, he said, but anything without a bone structure is nauseating.

I can't make them compete with your stew.

Green bean casserole.

Hmm, Naomi said.

They watched the water. Naomi was waiting for him to leave but he didn't seem like he was going to. She took the nearest pole and reeled it in, unhooking the worm and pushing it into the black soil, maybe it would regenerate and live, shaking off its bath and unsolicited gut piercing. She opened the tackle box and tied a spinner to the line.

Trying anyway? Michael asked.

There's panfish, she said. They like shiny things, it gets their attention. Things forget what they were doing when they see something shiny in the water. It knocks them right out of their heads, I'm sure you know.

Michael didn't catch on.

Can I cast it? he asked.

Naomi sighed, she hoped unnoticeably. She couldn't make him leave. She could reel in the other poles, collect the blanket and

containers, and move down the lake. But he could follow. The lake attracted chatty, oblivious people, they didn't know why, and not how to act when they got there. The appeal of solitude wasn't in them and they didn't recognize it in others. They didn't recognize others, actually. She could go home but this was her spot.

Do you know how? she asked.

No. Basically yes. I haven't done it before but I can.

Naomi held the grip and flicked her wrist a few times, loose and easy. But Michael wasn't watching her, he was watching the sunlight reflecting off the spinner. She wished she had the arm strength to cast it clear across the lake, that he would jump in and go after it.

If I show you, you have to sit quietly, she said, and try to enjoy the landscape.



## I'm an App

Commissioner, the trouble with the fire station lawn is all the sticks. There are too many to pick up. We've ruined two city mowers already, just trying to plow through it. Look at my mouth when I'm speaking and imagine the letters flying out one by one, letters in three dimensions, solid colored, block and all caps. To make it less work, say that when a word is completed, its letters group together and hang in the air a second. That gives you time to read it, Commissioner. Now I am like an app! I am sans threat. You need/enjoy me. And it feels good to be the new hotness, I must admit.

We both feel better now. Think of everything you, y'know, see and hear as your smartphone, and all the people as apps. I'm in front of you. I'm running, Commissioner. That is, you're running me. I'm a text-generating app. At the moment I am. The letters popping out of my mouth, remember. I can do other stuff - no, hold on, I take that back. This means something so let's say this is what I do. What use is a multi-purpose app.



Thank you for your input re: the fire station lawn problem. How to keep it neat and green. The ultimate goal is lush and full. For starters let's get it the right color and get rid of all these sticks. Every morning there are more. That's weird isn't it. I understand you've tried everything - gathering them, mulching them, laying down a tarp, planting grass seed, getting the guy from the ballfield down here to check the soil irrigation, even the Google thing of loosing a herd of goats to eat it up. And still each morning, more sticks.

What you need to do is pave it. Pave the lawn. I know it's not what you want, but think of how easy it'll be to drive the firetrucks to the street. They'll be off to rescue kitties in no time flat. Remove a foot of topsoil, dump a bunch of gravel down, smooth it out, and pour concrete on the whole mess. After that you won't have to worry about no sticks. The pavement will repel them, like like polarity. Sticks won't go near it.

I am glad I could do that for you. Please keep me open. If you shake me, I'll do a funny dance. If you tell me something, I'll repeat it back to you in a funny voice.



## Religion over Dinner

- Messa Jo Moppalos, Messa Jolene. Messa Jolene, Messa Jo Moppalos. Messa, Messa Jo is from Greektown. She lives in a building all full-up with ancient history. Messa Jo, Messa is attempting to, to devolve into a lower species.
- She doesn't wish to be a human anymore.
- I have no problem with our genus.
- Darling, we all do.
- Canapé?
- These look scrumptious.
- What do you think they are?
- Braised lamb and belicino and air-grown tomatoes.

- Mmm.
- *You* wolfed that down.
- She's practicing for life on the steppes.  
Eat what you can before something comes along  
and shames you.
- Is that what you had in mind, the steppes?
- I forget. Look at this mirror. I can't.
- You won't.
- I'm sorry but it is gauche. All those silver  
spires coming off it.
- It's supposed to be like a flower. Or the  
sun.
- Or Chinese New Year?
- The center is a fish-eye. Beautifying.
- My nose is big, now my chin.
- The piece is material proof of my neurosis.
- I need a TV makeup chair.

- Yes, but *I* need TV makeup.
- You do to hide that pentagram on your forehead.
- Excuse me, I'm proud of my religion.
- I'm proud of working for a 501(c)(3).
- It's who I am.
- What I don't understand is why you constantly advertise it.
- It is written. Our Dark Lord is the light.
- His dark energy dark-matters to me.
- Oh my glass is empty. I could go for another Sterling Cooper. Messa? Messa Jo?
- I'm good and someone's had too much already.
- Tell you what, we can call Him here right now. Everyone join hands.
- You're drunk.
- My hands.

- I'll be - oh look, an armoire on the street. Is that antique? I must go up close, excuse me.

- You ready?

- Ready for nothing to happen, right in line with the rest of this party? Yes.

- O Master hear my call. I am but your lowly servant and-

- WHATUP!

- Holy shit.

- Hail, Satan!

- SUP YALLS?

- I gotta get out of here.

- Do not let go of my hands!

- I have to go I have to!

- YOU BROUGHT ME TO A PARTY! I AM CYSED, MESSA JO.

- It's my pleasure, Lord. May I introduce my friend?

- No!
- This is Messa.
- Are you insane? Do not. Identify me to Satan.
- Messa has a problem with me wearing your symbol, Lord.
- WORD.
- Let go of me! Let go!
- I'll conjure you later, Satan.
- Thank God he's gone.
- Who?
- That freaked me out. You people from Greektown don't mess around.
- You want to come to black mass on Sunday?
- No. Maybe.



## The Feeling of Being Hit

A few years ago Sidney Sussex was traveling. The weather was irrelevant. It could be said it was “indoors,” that is temperate and windless, apart from the occasional by-vent draft, with consistent artificial light, and no hope of fog, humidity, or precipitation. When he landed at SEZ, he retrieved his luggage and walked underground to the subway. His stop was beneath a modern shopping mall, which was adjacent to the hotel where he was staying.

The hotel had a storefront in the mall, selling snacks, knick-knacks, T-shirts, and single servings of OTC drugs, in effect competing with the Carrefour beside it. Sidney felt self-conscious pulling his wheeled luggage through the mall, the clicking on the gaps in the tiles, but he wasn't the only one, and reception wasn't that far really. Once up the elevator from the subway he was already on the correct wing. He finished this part of his journey in this way. Apart from the light on the subway platform, the only time the sameness of the indoor weather hiccupped was in the cab of the jet bridge, whose seal with

the airplane door wasn't weather-tight.

Sidney checked in, they had his reservation. The windows of his room permitted a direct view of the beach, the tooth-colored sand, and the water, turquoise near the land, a deep azure farther out. The wind off the ocean pushed against the palm trees, trying to loose the nest of coconuts. It all seemed irrelevant. The sound in the room was the hum of the A/C, which relaxed him.

First thing, he checked his email. The one he'd been waiting for was there. It was from the Kansas Bar Association. The president retired last May and someone had nominated Sidney. If chosen he'd be the first African-American to hold the post.

Dear Mr. Sussex, the letter began. He read it through.

He decided to pay the airline fee to move up his ticket and go on to MES. Sidney thought of taking a cab. He could tell the driver to go fast, he was in a hurry. There could be a car accident, he could be killed. But the idea of going outside... He took the metro as always. There was still a chance the subway cars would collide with each other, but he sighed. This was less than the chance of a plane crash, already next to nothing.

He was on the subway platform when a burst of wind hit him. He'd been looking down. He frowned at the cool persistence of the gust swatting his face. Out in public, I can't control everything, he reminded himself. He



stood it. At least it smelled processed.

The car doors opened with a ding.



## Fame

The Tokyo train station was retired from use by The Prioress prior to her engagement to herself. She'd realized she was all she'd ever need, she announced, and thanked the press for coming to see her in her hotel on Block 29.

The terrible thing in her life was how she saw faces everywhere. Floating in the air, circling her. Angry faces, always ladyboys, that sang bluegrass ditties like *Toy Heart* and *How Far to Little Rock*. Unsettling, they followed her everywhere, no one else could see them.

At that time The Prioress still tried to get out of her hotel. She had her earbuds turned up to drown out the voices, but its light went to blinking red outside Ginza station and soon the thing was out of juice. She passed an arcade on Block 34, expecting to hear K-Pop, and instead heard a rerun of the May 1, 1948 episode of *The Biscuit Flower Hour* with Conrad Cole, provided by the ladyboys in Savannahn accents.

That the hovering nuisances had talent was nothing she'd acknowledge, of course. Why would she when whenever anyone came close to her they appropriated the speech of ancient heralds: "Hearken, Prioress, yon dog deigns to comport himself azurely with a can of Mit Ghamr's aluminum." Then one of the heads would somehow materialize a mouth harp and a hand with one finger with which to twang it, and the others would break up laughing. It is one thing to be tormented by voices and another to be humiliated by them.

We weren't surprised she stopped using public transportation, even in a city as crowded as Tokyo. Her career became a mushroom cap overlain with spores. Promoters who wanted her received a rider listing private jets and limousines, as well as a questionnaire. She expected them back and would grade them too. She'd only accept gigs from those who scored a D minus minus, exactly.

[Excerpted from *Tas-tee: The Louise Évenement Story*, Merzifon Press, 1982]



## The Museum Sponsor

My name is Harz Roller. I am an investor. I made my money in textiles, by certain, in straw. Heaping mounds of straw I bought from a fellow who grew cereal grains on 400 acres outside Blackburn. When he was through with it - I am not here to argue.

My business was to turn that straw into wearable garb, hats and shoes mainly. That is because in addition to my native English, I speak two languages: business and design. I take pleasure in my work. It is satisfying its ownself. But it has put me in the position of being able to act on my fancy, in particular the sponsoring of museum exhibits.

I get a thrill from it, I really do. Me little mum did a kick-step the first time she went into Clitheroe Castle and saw the names painted in big letters on the ancient crumbly wall: whatsisname, JRR Turner, and yours truly Harz Roller, in same-size type. I grabbed her by the elbow, poor thing, couldn't have her having a fall on account of the county putting her son on the same level as the boat painter.

I started sponsoring after I had a to-do with a councilor - I won't say who but he was only from a two-member ward - over an antenna I wanted to construct abutting the company HQ. It was to be 100 meters, and this fellow said because of that it could interfere with airplanes and must be fitted with blinking red lights.

I protested.

He said it was that or I halve the height.

And who was to pay the cost of electricity for running the lights from sundown to sunup? I inquired.

You Mr. Roller, and the lights must remain on during the day, he said.

During the day as well?

Our safety standards require it.

Why 50 meters and not 100, I asked, airplanes can surely fly at 50m as well, why I would virtually guarantee that every airplane in the UK, if it leaves the ground, at some point on its journey flies at a level of 50m.

He bade me a good day and excused himself.

Oh ho councilor, so Harz Tower is not to be, I said jocundly to myself.

I sought my friend's assistance. A man of my standing, it goes without saying, has friends in county government. I discovered this benighted councilor loved fine art, and that he was organizing an exhibition of Britain's esteemed painters to be held here in Lancashire. I obtained a seat on the relevant committee and used my power to sow bramble thickets on his field of play. In the end he got his desire, but it was truncated, and only the aforementioned would be on display. Alas I ensured the county could hardly afford that. Who would make up the balance? Naturally I put forth myself, and the show went off at the castle with the billing I've described.

The opening was a gala. Never had I felt such warmth and recognition from the common people. Behind me someone suggested I might run for council myself. I turned my head and found our MP of Blackburn, whom I'm happy now to call a colleague, Mr. Jack Straw.



## Custom Dictates

Cardinal Ordinal ordained in a corridor a horrible ordinance: Let a man sew French cuffs on a button-down work shirt costing less than 14 dollars and give him the option to swap the shirt for a honey-glazed ham. The latter will last until morning for a family of six, the former will be worn by all six in turn for years apiece, the father to his job, with work slacks and a belt, the mother to bed, with the top three buttons unbuttoned, panties, and no brassiere, and the sons successively as each reaches a size whereon it will fit. In this way it the shirt could be made well use of for some 20 revolutions of this planet about its sphere of nuclear fire.

The rule of the Cardinal is as follows: the mother must give up use of the shirt at the time the father does, if not before, as her continued draping of the garment about her bare breasts in a stimulating manner, whether it is washed between her appropriations of it and those of the eldest son, washed in hot water on a vigorous cycle in God's gift of laundry detergent or not, after which the son

goes about his day in it, wiping burger juice and condiments off his mouth with his sleeve, and so on, undoubtedly crosses a line into moral oddness and discomfit.

The look on the face of the father when he comes home from work wearing a white Oxford with blue pinstripes, a name brand from the discount department store, which he'd treated himself to on the passing of the shirt in question to his eldest son, in effect taking fudge out of the chubby middle one's mouth, and sees, collapsing heavily into his own dad's recliner, lifting his eyes from the screen of his computerized whatsit, his son traversing the hardwood floors in mud-splattered light-up sneakers, the shirt in question half-tucked and bunched around his buttcrack, would freeze the blood in the ropey veins of the Devil himself and give him a chill such as he has not felt since the time he peeked his crooked nose into the Cardinal's mind, gagging on the swell of disinfectant and narrowing his pupils into futuristic nanoscaled diodes, in the face of all that snow-blind white, effectively enabling him to tick the box for blindness on his federal tax form, a mind that, if a sunbeam were turned on it, would have no edges, lack all appearance of a shaft, and would show in the air not a single mite of weightless dust.

His mind wanted color and lust. Divorced from everything that makes us human, the Cardinal was *ipso facto* the perfect person to anoint himself the coiner of laws the rest of us



could never follow, except in cases where our children wear our spouse's sexy clothes.



## Mazatlán

Bacterium are unrelated to the condition of the truck. That is, a bacterium is unrelated. If we could but wipe it down with super cooled water on sterile rags I am confident the bacteria, as the impurity, would instantly freeze, stick to the rag, and be lifted with our hands off into the soapy bucket and there to drown.

What, for the seventh time, about the drug gang making no subtle steps between the front stoop and the back deck, their formation is abnormal, and the clicking of their boot heels on the lane's cracker crunch sets Jilly's mind mechanical. It's difficult to think of what's pretty about an unpredicted five-minute snowfall in the winter, her mind is on the rhythm, her thought is on the beat, they couldn't be so bad, and neither could the windshield mottled with germs, if only they were on the back windshield where it's tinted, it would be harder to see, and moreso if she left the rearview mirror set to dim at all times, then what she hit could be forgotten.

But as it is if Jilly wants to go somewhere she has to drive, there's no fun hanging about the house in Mexico, there's only so much scrub brush a girl can look at, only so many dogs wandering around rubbing their scabby open wounds on strangers she can meet, before anyone would get the urge to go. She stands it as long as she can before she goes out to the smooth-grilled pickup, its grill slats gone to ovals with erosion, its make worn away, metal creaky, but it starts, and off after dark on the road over the ocean, only to find both headlamps are out, but it's pretty up here, the moon is out, and her mind is on the cantina in Mazatlán, so she doesn't see the men in the middle of the road, wearing black shirts and black hats, carrying black trash bags from some kind of armored car down a path off the road.

They ought to hear her, why don't they hear her, but they don't, and one of them meets the grill and goes over the hood and leaves on her windshield the bloody print of a pencil thin mustache, eyes closed thank god, sliding off as she jerks the wheel too late. She can't stop, she's alone, she goes on to the city, fast, in case they follow, but they don't.

Jilly comes to realize she made it because someone told them to let her. There will be no police. Those men weren't supposed to be there, doing what they were. The gas station is closed for the night but she finds a hose, thinking she'll say she hit a coyote if anyone asks, but there's no one. Maybe that's what she did anyway, hit a coyote. No, there was no

one crossing anything down here. Those men had drugs. She sprays the windshield a long time. The whole truck is spotless. Now it looks suspicious.

Everything here is dirty. She turns the hose on herself, on her face and hair, keeping her clothes dry, and she gets back in her crumpled car and drives it north. Driving is the only thing that gets it looking like it belongs. When day breaks she's parked outside Tijuana, where mineral salts flat on their back wanting to be microscopic parts of an eye mass on *Avenida Revolución*.



## Sheryl's Path

When Sheryl was little she played a game the kids in the neighborhood called whist. It wasn't the whist of the French, it was a name they heard from their parents on TV, which is where they saw the most of them. The kids grew up on a commune and their parents, all six or eight of them, had cooking shows on PBS.

Off-screen they'd swap husbands but what they never swapped was a recipe. Not surprisingly many of these trysts took place in the kitchen, that is, the actual kitchens of one or another's home. The distance between the homes wasn't so long that one's erection would go away on the speed-walk over. In other words, if Jenny found her mouth should be salivating when she'd just eaten, or Kyle should be transfixed online by a pouty banner ad, and if they knew the s.o. was that afternoon at a taping, and because the kids were at school until Christmas, they could climb into their overalls and plough each other's furrows til they wilted.

Little Sheryl would be sat on her bed, feet dangling off the edge with a warm Tupperware on her lap, watching mom and dad teach the aged how to make the dish in front of her.

“I wish you could smell that,” Mom said to the camera.

Sheryl could. “Let me try some of that,” she said, lifting the wooden spoon discolored red to her smiling lips.

Dad said the same to George’s mom dunking a peppermint stick in his cayenne hot chocolate, and Sheryl looked at her lap not wanting it.

As a teenager she’d live with her step-mother’s sister, a lapidary woman who’d worked in Manhattan real estate since Mount St. Helens, and upon graduation from NYU film school she took a job with Greenpeace on their interceptors, got sprayed with fire hoses from the decks of whalers, and almost died.



## Body Dysmorphia

Hey guys what do you think of my muumuus, floral printed, light and lightly colored? Don't they make you think of eating food at bedtime, when you're just a little hungry and you really should go to sleep but temptation opens the cupboard and you find a box of vanilla almond granola that your wife bought cause you asked her to but you'd forgotten you did and now there it is, and you think of the vanilla soymilk all cool and fridgery, and you add one to the other in a pale ceramic bowl, spoon (via faux silver) the nougat in your mouth, ululating your tongue, absorbed by the chewing sounds like a meteor detonating a Siberian forest by your inner ear, and next thing you know you're not just not hungry but full, cement-block full, grossly so from the sugar, and it's time to sleep but you can't, and laying there with the lights off cuddling your wife she has a conversation with you she won't remember in the morning because she's actually asleep, as you curse your weak willpower, thinking of the gut that hangs over your belt, food at night turning to fat, and how laying on your back is good because the gut is gone. You realize then that that bowl

of cereal is the worst problem you have in the world.





## The Whale to the Scuba Diver

Yeah I've got a song. It ain't perfect, I've been working on it here and there, when I'm not feeding or, y'know, feeding. It'll have to be a capella. I should warm up but I won't. Don't you hate when you go to a concert and the guitar player is tuning with the PA on? Bypass it then we don't have to hear it.

The song's about Queen Nefertiti. She wore hats, looked like mail tubes. Her long neck, her face, and then the hat tube with a cap on the end. She looked like a totem pole. All that's missing is an animal grimace and wings sticking out the sides. Believe me, I've seen 'em. I swim there. Song's called *Boneyizm*.

But I really want to learn a musical instrument. I was thinking the harp. No really, it would be easy. I don't even need a custom job, something whale-size. Regular harp, y'know, I'd rip the strings right out of it. But that's cool cause there's an answer. I got a contact at Steinway. My cousin knows this shrimp who knows this other shrimp who guides this spear-fisher on the Buccoo Reef.

The spear-fisher is, like, a sales associate there in Pigeon Point.

All I need to do is get them to take one of last year's concert grands and rip the plate out. Or drop the whole thing down here and I'll lug it over to the oil derrick. It's not like I need a floor model. If they got one in the warehouse with a little water damage, no problem. Give it to me, I'll use it. Then once I get the cast iron plate out, I stand it on its side and play it. I know those strings can take my flippers, and I know these flippers got soul.

It don't hurt, squirt.



## Iraq

Faladabad? *Faladabad?* There was a maze of personality. The squad leader was a drip. Insecure, neurotic. Anyone who could do his job was put on point. There was no rotation, only the guys he thought threatened him went out first. Rigoberto was one. He was a no b.s. guy. You could tell what he was thinking by his face, he didn't hide it. He'd never have made it as a politician and that was a good thing. You gotta be a little sick for that work. Rigoberto said what he thought. He was good infantry though. He took orders. I mean, he cut corners, ditched to play video games, half-assed cleaning the motor pool. He found the spot where he could bend regulations without getting in much trouble and that's where he made his home.

It's early. Still dark out, and cold. Guys got their canvas jackets on for the wind. We're rolling around Faladabad's west end. Rigoberto's on the first humvee, outside on the turret. We approach the end of the street and we see smoke. Maybe from a barrel fire, maybe the enemy. Rigoberto calls a halt. It's

his call, he's got night vision on. Squad leader countermands him cause we're to proceed due south to rendezvous at 7-11 for beefy taquitos. You know the enemy.

So we're still rolling and we get lit up. I mean out of nowhere. Flares are streaking purple light, like magnesium flashes, blinding us. Now we stop. Drivers push the humvees bumper to bumper in an arch and all I can think of are covered wagons pulling into a circle when Indians attack. I'm trying to return fire, we all are, but we're under heavy ordinance. It's coming from up so we know they're in the buildings. I'm flat against the vehicle, away from its tire cause those keep getting shot out which makes the vehicle drop almost to the ground. The ordinance we're taking stirs up the wind. I'm coughing on debris, listening a continual fire truck horn.

Rigoberto crawls up by me. He's got a sniper rifle. He tells me to disassemble my weapon and I listen. He improvises a stand using its stock and barrel. He points the sniper rifle between two bumpers and waits. I'm looking him in the face. He's loose. He catches movement in a window and pulls the trigger. The wind dies down a little. He crawls to the next space between the bumpers, toward the building on the other side of the street, sets up, and waits. Just him sitting there, every one of us knows we're gonna make it. Rigoberto waits. The enemy fire is becoming more sporadic. Whether they can feel his scope on them, or whether they know they've only got a few more minutes before our air strike comes with

missiles set to kitty litter, their fire slows. We get up and give that street hell.

Back at base, we bed down. Everyone is on his bunk, smoking, staring up. No casualties, no IEDs. Rigoberto gets a medal. That helps him get promoted to the rank he should be.

We finish the tour under the squad leader and he gets promoted too.



## Karyotype of an Elderly Man with Alzheimer's

Twenty-four hoof prints are stamped on my genes. Twenty-four animals are led past me, twenty-four ungulate mammals, deer, roe deer, Shetland pony, camel, and giraffe. I'm on the ground astride the La Brea Tar Pits. There is a narrow path between us. I'm lying on my back, bending a side and stretching the other like the right half of number 5. I'm trying to grow a brain. The animals can't pass the path with ease. I'm in the way, they have to step on me. Each does, even the giraffe, it's that or the pits. Each stamp is one step closer to my becoming human. With the last I have a sex. I have what I need, no fewer, no more. The ungulates are safe. I stand, too quick, almost splatting in the warm bubble tar. 0 consciousness! 0 brutal drives I have the smarts to suppress! Seventy trips around the sun and I forget everything.



## When an Idea Hits

Driver, back to the meat world. I have several ideas for sketches. One, Hemingway's head in 3/4 profile, middle age flavor, black moustache, hair back, grapefruit cheeks in a wry grimace. Protein, man, hurry!

Two, Faulkner's head in the outline of Tintin's, hair white, mustache dark, malleable, naught but ink in the wells of his eyes. Medium, charcoal.

Three, conical samurai hats, their tips pointing between NNW and NNE, ghostly, as though drawn in the dust on a cherry wood desk.

Lasts, armour, but only the vambrace and spaulders, sectional, in turquoise, laid on a tiger-skin rug, which is itself laid on a bear-skin rug. When they drop by my crater home I shall walk in the runoff like Frankenstein, without bending my knees.



## Recipe for Attracting Aliens

Take four dozen slices of french toast. Stack them one atop the next. With the thumb and forefinger, remove the 13th slice from the cinnamonony phallus and discard. Speak the incantation. For best results let the syrup steep for 18 weeks in a solution of 3% mercury, 97% canned sauerkraut water. Give the powdered eggs a home. Mash all ingredients into one super dense white dwarf pastry ball. Fly to the satellite grounds of the SETI Institute, hide, and toss the ball up and down.

*(courtesy The History Channel)*





## This Mess

I have kept busy this year volunteering at the county rest home. People there have ideas I don't hear out in the world.

Did I know that if a farmer finds boll weevil in his cotton, his daughter will give birth to rasslers, unless the farmer at once applies roll-on deodorant to the undersides of his livestock? Did I?

I got it all easy, try getting old then I'll know.

And woe to he who gets sticky burrs on his chaps, if before sunset he cannot find a cowpoke to best in a fiddle-off.

Whoo I think I've heard it all. Bless this mess, the USA.



## The HMS Colophon

The HMS Colophon, shipped to the Iberian peninsula. Waves biting the hull with millions of fish teeth. Guys below deck passing buckets of water over the edge like a Jonesburg fire brigade. Leaks just enough to keep them going in shifts.

When the breeze stops they play stickball with Jonah's pegleg and a lump of hard tack. The winner gets an extra ration. Eats the ball. Sour, furry oranges for dessert. Finally the first mate plugs the leak, making ersatz adobe by mixing sawdust and you don't want to know what.

Their plane is inhospitable, the motion continual, rising up and falling down. The horizon on a sine curve. Easier to look at the deck and see feet.

Clouds are burned off in the day. The sky is charred and they can't come back at night. It's clear. Look off the side and the sea's

glowing. Iridescent kelp. Occasionally a chunk goes black and a baleen whale's been by.

Look up and the Milky Way's out. Noticed by negating. Stars everywhere but for one dark scar on the heavens.

Men did that, one says, it's all our sins and it's getting bigger. Head back, mouth open, he sings a profane shanty. He's pissing diluted grog in the sea. He kept the better part for his body.

The better part of everything is for the body, says the first mate to one of the crew. Both of them are facing the deck.

Morning and the sky is red. The sail is stowed in a blink. The captain is a one-eyed man and every blink's a wink. He has salt beef and rum breath. Hatches get battened. Men with ropes put their weight on one leg. The captain ties himself to the wheel. It's real still. It stays that way til night when the stars go out.



## For My 100th Birthday, the Future

The massing of the new Pangaea will make no sound. It will happen so gradually that there will be nothing to listen for. But with enough hard drive space and a good German mic we could record Belém, Brazil for 250 million years, play it back on oh-so fast forward, and hear a massive continental crunch. A DJ will sample the sound and it will go viral. After a few days it will be forgotten. It will sit on a university server, unaccessed and unknown. The IT department will have a student on work-study. She'll play it on Rapture day to mask the unapologetic celestial horns.

When the sun expands there will be no sound. When it becomes a red giant, no sound. When it reaches the Earth and disintegrates it, there will be real-time sound. That hissing is the Himalayas turning to steam.

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## About the Type

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